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# Factors Influencing Student Engagement

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess and outline major factors influencing student engagement in the middle school context. In order to contribute to the existing body of research and to benefit students by outlining the particular aspects of learning experience that are related to engagement, a case study has been carried out, which sought to analyze the students' schooling experience as a source of valuable data. Qualitative methods of data collection were applied during the study. The survey, focus-group interview, and observations allowed classifying the factors influencing the levels of engagement among the study participants into five major clusters: 1) communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences; 2) interactions between students and teachers; 3) levels of academic challenge; 4) supporting classroom environment; and 5) supporting family environment. These clusters unite factors that were found to produce the greatest influence on students' eagerness to participate in in-class activities and on students' perception of the importance of education, as well as desire to succeed academically.


*Key words*: student engagement; behavioral engagement; emotional engagement; cognitive engagement; learning community; family engagement; classroom environment; instructional style.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Overview

Student engagement has become one of the desired outcomes of school in recent years because of its strong connection to student well-being. In particular, previous research had demonstrated decisive links between student engagement in learning and such outcomes as school dropout (Finn & Rock, 1997), substance use (Bond, Butler, Thomas, Carlin, Glower, & Bowes, 2007), mental health, and academic outcomes (Bakker, Vergel, & Kuntze, 2015; Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Students engaged in learning were found to be more successful academically, as well as less likely to drop out of school. They were found to be intrinsically motivated to invest in learning, attend classes, and participate in study activities (Bakker et al., 2007). As student engagement is widely presumed to be malleable, it is relevant to both explore the predictors of school engagement and outline factors that can be stimulated in order to positively influence it. Therefore, in light of the described positive consequences of student engagement, the current study aims at contributing to the growing body of research by exploring the mechanisms of influence on student engagement.

By illuminating factors that produce the greatest influence on student engagement, in particular, by outlining such factors that increase it, the current research makes a significant contribution into both theoretical and practical frameworks on student engagement. On the one hand, the researcher's thorough examination of the case under study can be utilized as a starting point and a background for further, more extensive research with a wider sample. On the other hand, the findings of the research can be widely applied in contexts similar to that under examination. Correspondingly, consideration and practical application of the research findings is likely to allow schools and teachers to engage students into learning more effectively.

## Purpose and Objectives

This study is aimed at examination and illumination of major factors positively (and negatively) affecting student engagement. Therefore, the major purpose of the research was to explore how, why, and to what extent the quality of teacher instruction, the use of technology by the teachers and/or by the students, the availability and character of feedback from teachers, the extra-curricular activities such as sports, clubs, and concerts, the school climate and its capability to encourage social and emotional well-being, family engagement, and students' socioeconomic background among other factors influence students and affect their engagement into learning. Illumination of the factors that produce the greatest impact on student engagement, either positive or negative, is relevant, because, consequentially, it allows better utilization of available resources through focusing them on interventions that target particularly distinguished individual or contextual factors. With regard to the outlined major purpose, the following research questions were developed for the study:

1. What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning during the semester?
2. What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?
3. How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context?

In order to examine the dissertation topic and to reach the outlined research purpose, the case study approach was chosen as a major research methodology.

A case study was carried out through a semi-structured focus-group interviews, survey, and observations. All of the mentioned data collection methods were aimed at retrieving insider information on student engagement. In other words, they were incorporated to gain insight into the perspectives of students on certain practices and events as particularly engaging into learning. The method of observation, however, allowed comparing whether

self-reported information on student engagement corresponds to the observable and thus externally noticeable data.

## Thesis Structure

In total, the thesis consists of five chapters. The introductory chapter presented the context for the research and the research topic. It clarified major research objectives and briefly explained the methodological approach utilized to reach them.

Chapter two contains a literature review, which is aimed at exploring and explaining major concepts and terms relevant to the research. It conceptualizes the notion of student engagement, which is central to the research, and clarifies major areas of interest, creating the background for the research. In particular, it examines and evaluates the factors influencing student engagement, as well as reflects on the impact they may produce on student engagement.

Chapter three is aimed at clarification of the utilized research methodology. Beginning with the presentation of the research purpose and the research questions, it reflects on the methods that were used to reach the stated research objectives. This part of the dissertation provides an overview of the research design and reflects on the research process. Particularly, it provides a thorough description of the methods that were applied for both data collection and data analysis in context of the studied case. As evident from this Chapter, both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized for data collection. It also presents tactics that were used to ensure the reliability and validity of the research results.

Chapter four is devoted to the presentation and discussion of the research findings. The results obtained through both qualitative and quantitative research are presented and described in here. In this chapter, the findings of the research are discussed and interpreted in context of their relation to the published literature and to the objectives set. In addition, the

role of theory, the effect on professional practice, and the appropriateness of methodology and data collection are reviewed and discussed.

Chapter five is a summary of the major findings and principle features of the dissertation. On the one hand, it thoroughly summarizes the conducted research, outlining both its strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, it contains recommendations regarding practical implementation of the research findings and suggestions for future research in the realm of student engagement.

## Definition of Terms

*Behavioral engagement* – Behavioral engagement is often defined as an engagement based on one's involvement into the academic, social, and extracurricular processes of school (Fredricks, Blumenfield, & Paris, 2004). In context of multidimensional conceptualization of engagement, it is one of the aspects of engagement, which is used to determine whether students are fully involved into both their academics and activities offered by the school in addition to the curriculum. Behavioral engagement refers to particular student behaviors related with learning, such as concentrating, exerting effort, taking initiative, being persistent in the face of failure, following rules and positively interacting with teachers and peers among others (Hattie & Anderman, 2013). Research indicates that students' behavioral engagement is likely to lead to greater academic achievement and school retention (Hattie & Anderman, 2013). As a mediator between contextual factors and the desired learning outcomes, behavioral engagement can be increased by changing the aspects of the learning environment. This research considered all the aspects of engagement, attempting to determine the factors influencing student engagement. It was suggested in the research that more involvement produces more engaged students.

*Cognitive engagement* – Defined by Fredricks et al. (2004), cognitive engagement is an aspect of engagement, which is based on student investment in school and the processes of learning. A cognitively engaged student is a student who is thoughtful, strategic, and willing to exert the necessary effort for comprehension of complex ideas or mastery of difficult skills (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). The research on cognitive engagement is often concerned with how much students invest in learning and whether they are willing to work extra to get better academic outcomes.

*Emotional engagement* – Emotional engagement was defined by Fredricks et al. (2004) as an engagement based on how students identify with their school. Identification with the school here included belonging, valuing, or a feeling of being important to the school, as well as appreciation of success in school-related outcomes (Christenson et al., 2012). With regard to its definition, emotional engagement focuses on the extent of positive and/or negative reactions to teachers, classmates and peers, academics, and school in general. As presumed, positive emotional engagement contributes to student ties to school (or other educational institution, i.e. college, university) and influences willingness of students to study and participate in other school-related activities.

*Factors influencing student engagement* –As indicated by an extensive body of academic research, student engagement is malleable in character, which suggests of its capacity to vary both as a function of time and as a function of context (Coates, 2006; Collins, 2014; Conner, 2011; Christenson et al., 2012; Franklin, Harris, & Allen-Meares, 2013; Shernoff, 2013). With this regard, factors influencing student engagement are particular aspects of the learning context or certain characteristics of learning environment, which affect students' involvement

into learning and extracurricular activities, their willingness to invest into learning, and their identification with the school.

*Student engagement* – Depending on the theorist, different definitions of student engagement were elaborated. In this research, a multidimensional conceptualization of student engagement was considered, which refers to engagement as consisting of three major components – behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. During the study, engagement was conceptualized as an individual trait. In context of the research, it was considered that an engaged student is the student who is involved into learning and extracurricular activities, identifies herself/himself with the school, and is willing to invest into learning by working extra to get better academic outcomes.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

Since the middle of 1990s and up to the present, student engagement is distinguished as one of the most important issues faced by the contemporary educational system in general and independent educators in particular (Conner, 2011; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Such attention to the concept is completely reasonable and easily understandable, as students who are engaged into the process of learning are more likely to succeed academically and less likely to drop out of school (Phillips, 2015; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003; Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Engaged students usually pursue academic degrees, while those, who resist engagement, are more likely to drop out of school. Evidently, educators are primarily interested in enhancing student engagement because it is one of the major tactics of student retention and academic performance improvement (Conner, 2011; Jang et al., 2010; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Phillips, 2015). Given the great social and economic outcomes that stand behind the concept of student engagement, it is completely reasonable for educational facilities and institutions to search for theoretical and practical approaches, able to assist in attainment of the major social goal of education. Increasingly, while student engagement is seen as one of the necessary conditions for effective learning and as a driver of academic achievement, the demand for research in the realm continually grows. In order to proceed to the elaboration of effective measures that would stimulate student engagement, it is necessary to gain an exhaustive theoretical comprehension of the phenomenon of student engagement and of the factors that may impact it, either positively or negatively.

This chapter is a review of the literature in the area of student engagement. The principal goal of literature review was to provide a clear conceptualization of the phenomenon of student engagement and to outline and analyze major factors influencing this

phenomenon in context of educational institution. Additionally, an attempt was made to systematize major factors in a manner that allows comprehending the impact each of the factors is likely to produce on student engagement as a concept consisting of three major dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Close examination of the complex notion of student engagement paired with an analysis of major factors affecting it is expected to illuminate the patterns that can be further utilized during the process of elaboration of measures aimed at stimulation and enhancement of student engagement as a means to improve academic performance and to retain students.

## Methodology

To reach the outlined purposes, the following methodological approach was utilized. Primarily, the database searches were conducted repeatedly to retrieve the academic peer reviewed articles. An access to the articles from scholarly journals was gained through *EBSCOhost Database* and *Educational Resource Information Center* with the keywords of student engagement, family engagement, student achievement, dimensions of engagement, and technology and learning. While reliability of the information found and its relevance were of primary importance, the academic articles were chosen so that to cover the topics related with student engagement in general and improvement of student engagement through stimulation of affecting factors in particular. Articles that contained no relevant and/or recent data on student engagement and improvement of student academic achievement were excluded.

The academic journal articles utilized as sources in the review were retrieved from diverse realms of study (e.g., management in education, behavior studies, education and technology, etc.), corresponding to such fields of knowledge as utilization of technological advances in educational process, active learning and learning-enhancement activities, and socioeconomic outcomes of education among others. To guarantee the reliability of the

articles under analysis and to search for additional sources, the reference lists of each of the chosen articles had been checked. Each of the articles was then read in full text, which allowed evaluating their relevance to the topic under analysis. Major findings were outlined for each of the articles. This allowed outlining and systematizing major problems further discussed in the review.

While reviewing the literature, it was found that most of the studies contained conceptually similar major themes, which were often articulated in a slightly different manner. In order to simplify the exposition of the examined concepts and major themes, the findings were re-grouped to correspond to two major purposes of this literature review: conceptualization of the notion of student engagement and examination and evaluation of the factors influencing engagement, as well as the impact they may produce on student engagement.

## Defining Student Engagement

Prior to outlining the influencing factors, either positive or negative, it is critically important to understand the very notion of student engagement, as well as to distinguish between the several dimensions of engagement, which are now discussed in the academic literature. There is no single definition that would exhaustively reveal the concept of student engagement due to the complexity of the notion (Trowler, 2010). Still, numerous attempts were made to describe the concept in a comprehensive manner, for instance, by considering its antithesis, contrasting it with other terms, or listing alternatives among other approaches. Additionally, it was considered reasonable to define engagement as a “multi-component construct comprised of subsets with associated indices” (Kim, Park, Cozart, & Lee, 2015, p. 262). Such approach to defining the concept turned out to be rather useful in research, as well as in the development of interventions, aimed at improvement of student engagement.

The very word ‘engagement’ is commonly used to denote such meanings as commitment, agency, and reciprocity, which makes the concept largely synonymous with the personally involving participation in some activity (Conner, 2011; Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Trowler, 2010). In addition, the term ‘engagement’ is sometimes used as a synonym to such words as active, attentive, interest, motivation, and effort (Conner, 2011). However, as it is increasingly pointed out, engagement and motivation, although connected, cannot be used as synonyms, because motivation is about direction and “the reasons for behavior,” while engagement is about energy in action and “the connection between person and activity” (p. 54). As any personal experience, student engagement is manifold and, therefore, can be described in a great amount of ways (Trowler, 2010). Kraft and Dougherty (2013), for instance, suggested that student engagement was related with a sense of competence or efficacy and the feeling of relatedness to the teacher and/or to the school. Alike concept was presented by Wang and Eccles (2013), who stated that student engagement becomes optimized when students perceive that the school context fulfills their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Tomlinson (1999), on the other hand, conceptualized engagement as “a magnet that attracts learner’s meandering attention and holds it. It means the learner has ‘wrapped around’ an important idea, has incorporated it accurately into his or her inventory of how things work. The learner owns the idea” (as cited in Conner, 2011, p. 54). Such definition, although hardly being laconic in form, accurately presents student engagement as a concept.

Although literature that deals with issues of education, as well as institutional research, is overwhelmed with a great variety of definitions of student engagement, “the more prevalent ones have become quite focused and technical” (Cloete, Maassen, & Bailey, 2015, p. 234). Thus, the National Survey of Student Engagement defined the term as “the intersection of the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities”

(Conner, 2011, p. 54). Overall, upon revising various definitions of engagement proposed by different researchers, one can notice that most of them draw attention to the positive engagement indicators, which can be systematized into several categories or dimensions. With this regard, it is sound to refer to the definition proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) as one of the most comprehensive and exhaustive in the field (Conner, 2011; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Trowler, 2010).

## Dimensions of Student Engagement

To explain the term explicitly, Fredricks and colleagues incorporated the three dimensions of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional (Conner, 2011; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Trowler, 2010). They presented the concept of behavioral engagement to cover the idea of student participation and involvement into the academic and social activities, which are crucial for academic achievement. Thus, a student can be considered engaged in behavioral context, if he/she tends to comply with behavioral norms and demonstrates the absence of negative and/or disruptive behavior. To explain students' positive and negative reactions to school in general and teachers and peers in particular, the concept of emotional engagement was presented (Conner, 2011; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Emotional engagement tends to shape the way students attribute themselves to the institution and influences their overall willingness to do the work. For example, it is sound to consider a student emotionally engaged, if he/she experiences such affective reactions as sense of belonging, interest or enjoyment. Finally, cognitive dimension was presented to explain the idea of investment that is intrinsic to the concept of engagement. Thus, it is cognitive engagement that is responsible for the students' "thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (Conner, 2011, p. 54). Cognitively engaged students are those who are completely invested into the process of learning and those who seek to go even beyond the requirements. Given that engagement is

comprised of three dimensions, students are engaged in studying when "they are behaviorally involved in learning tasks, experience enjoyment in science learning and are actively processing science ideas that motivate them to learn more" (Hackling, Byrne, Gower, & Anderson, 2015, p. 28). Altogether, the mentioned dimensions comprise the notion of engagement, denoting that it is more than just involvement or mere participation. Instead, along with activity, it requires sense-making and feelings (Trowler, 2010).

Dividing the concept of student engagement into several dimensions is both informative, as it allows to explain the term in a more explicit manner, and practically sound, as it becomes easier to measure or empirically study student engagement. In terms of their study, Hyungshim, Reeve, and Deci (2010) had distinguished between students' behavioral, or objective, engagement, which included publicly noticeable (and reported respectively) "students' on-task attention, effort investment, [and] persistence in the face of difficulty" (p. 14), and self-reported, or subjective, engagement, which included such individual experiences as "intentional learning, positive feelings, deep information processing, and general pro-activity" (p. 14). Thus, measurement of student engagement was treated as one of the ways to provide its empirical definition.

As evident, some studies in the field, present an alternative to that proposed by Fredricks and colleagues' multi-component constructs to define student engagement. For example, in their report Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) also identified three dimensions of engagement, but they outlined them as follows: social engagement, academic or institutional engagement, and intellectual engagement (as cited in Willms, 2011). By applying the term social engagement, the authors explained students' sense of belonging and desire to participate in school life. The term of academic engagement was used to measure and explain students' participation in the formal requirements of schooling. Finally, intellectual dimension was used to correspond to "emotional and cognitive investment in

learning, using higher order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge" (p. 3). The availability of alternatives suggests the complexity of the phenomenon of student engagement. Christenson et al. (2012) outlined two major perspectives on student engagement under which most of the definitions available fall. Some researchers, as they claimed, considered student engagement a 'meta-construct' or an organizing framework that unites and integrates different areas, such as motivation, behavioral participation, and school connectedness, as its integral parts (Christenson et al., 2012). Others, in construct, claimed for the need to put the concept of engagement in the clearly defined boundaries. Such lack of scientific unity within the researchers studying and theorizing the concept of student engagement may negatively affect the advancement of research on student engagement and, consequently, the elaboration of effective tactics for its improvement.

Depending on the chosen definition, the number, as well as content, of the agents the researchers would investigate in pursuit of the desired academic outcomes may vary from study to study (Cloete et al., 2015). For example, those who refer to the definition of engagement proposed by Kuh (2003), one of the well recognizable authors on the topic, tend to assume that student engagement, and thus academic achievement, depends on only two major agents (as cited in Cloete et al., 2015). Correspondingly, student engagement "represents time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of [education] and institutions do to induce students participate in this activities" (Cloete et al., 2015, p. 234). As evident from the definition, Kuh (2003) suggested that, in order to get a desired level of achievement, it is necessary to stimulate factors that refer to the individual student on the one hand and to the educational institution on the other hand. This gradation, however, represented rather simplified perception of student engagement. It attempted to enclose a complex notion into the strictly defined boundaries that allow

discussing student engagement as only a limited test model of a complex real-life phenomenon. Despite limited character, the model can represent some practical value, as, if applied in context of quantitative research, it allows analyzing the extent to which certain factors (i.e., variables) influence student engagement.

## Controlling Student Engagement Rates: Influencing Factors

Overall, the growing interest toward the notion of student engagement is justified by the "presumption of engagement being considered 'malleable'" (Conner, 2011, p. 54). In other words, it was found that, by their actions, educators could affect student engagement, either positively or negatively, where the terms 'positive' and 'negative' were used as not a statement of value judgment, but as a reflection of the students' attitude in terms of productivity or counter-productivity (Trowler, 2010). Indeed, student engagement widely depends on teachers' behavior. Careful planning and implementation of research-based strategies were found to produce the most fruitful outcomes on student academic performance (Jensen, 2013; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Phillips, 2015; Swiderski, 2011).

Evidently, there is still a noticeable gap in the levels of student engagement from school to school and from course to course. To explain the occurrence of this gap, one can speak of either good and bad teachers or good and bad students. However, as the practical evidence indicate, the difference takes place because of different levels of students' engagement from class to class and from school to school (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Thus, even the performance of a poor achiever can be improved through positive engagement, which explains why the same student may fall under the category of 'poor achievers' when taught by one teacher and under the category of 'high achievers' when taught by another teacher. As Trowler (2010) suggested, depending on the character of teacher's influence, the

dimensions of student engagement can assume different values: positive engagement, non-engagement, and negative engagement.

Both Trowler (2010) and Schlechty (2002) attempted to describe student engagement in context of levels that denote the intensity of engagement (Dietrich & Balli, 2014). However, in contrast to Trowler (2010), Schlechty (2002) outlined only two levels: "authentic engagement," which occurs when the student recognizes the importance of the learned material and finds the process of learning to be meaningful, and "ritualistic engagement," which occurs due to the reasons other than the content associated with the learning activity (as cited in Dietrich & Balli, 2014, p. 22). Unlike Dietrich and Balli, who superficially admitted the difficulty in differentiating levels of engagement in students within a classroom setting (because the observable behaviors are often similar), Trowler (2010) provided an exhaustive characteristic of each of the states of the dimensions of engagement. From the critical perspective, the proposed conceptualization and gradation of dimensions and meanings they may assume can represent both practical and theoretical value, providing considerable foundation for further research. For example, it can turn out to be rather valuable to develop a quantitative research which would empirically examine the enhancement of which of the dimensions of engagement in students results in greatest overall engagement and, correspondingly better learning outcomes (i.e., academic achievement) and greater student retention.

## Partners in Learning

It is completely reasonable to state that student's successful academic performance is often a matter of concern for both educators and the society in general, as well as the student's family in particular. Importance of education in contemporary society cannot be underestimated, as it is directly connected with a number of social and economic outcomes. Thus, students, who drop out of schools, often end up in a low-income status, because, due to

lack of necessary skills, they can pursue mainly low-paid jobs (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Those, who invest in their education, on the other hand, assume more competitive positions in terms of employment and usually tend to attain and maintain social and economic stability (Ezeala-Harrison, 1996). These tendencies basically explain the reasonableness of attention toward student engagement.

Increasing amounts of small-scale studies, as well as large empirical examinations in the field, proved that families and communities are the primary partners educators should seek to achieve in order to influence student engagement and improve overall academic performance (Auerbach, 2009; Bathgate & Silva, 2010; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Phillips, 2015). On the one hand, families are often interested in improving students' academic performance. On the other hand, apart from teachers at school, who are the primary factors in student motivation and achievement, parents have the greatest influence on students in adjusting their learning and studying behaviors (Jensen, 2013; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Finally, seeking for meaningful and effective partnerships that would contribute to the learning of youth is sound for schools, particularly considering a growing consensus that "schools cannot – and should not – fulfill the wide range of learning and development needs of youth alone" (Bathgate & Silva, 2010, p. 66). Both students' families and communities are often capable of providing additional support and resources, enhancing student motivation, engagement, and, therefore, academic achievement.

## Family Engagement

Increasing amount of contemporary studies in the realm of academic performance tended to conceptualize parent involvement as a tool for raising student achievement (Auerbach, 2009; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Furthermore, a growing number of empirical studies had shown that engagement between schools and families results in better academic

outcomes for students, because parents play a central role in shaping their children's behavior and engagement in school (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012). In their study, aimed at examining student engagement among gifted students, Wang and Neihart (2015) found that, through emotional engagement, parents could empower their children by "praising their efforts, affirming their intelligence, and providing them with various compensation and learning strategies to help them persevere through frustrations" (p. 156). Thus, family engagement, which leads to attainment of effective partnerships between parents, families, and schools, should be mentioned as one of the major factors influencing student engagement into the process of education. This statement had found considerable practical support within revised literature. For instance, in their randomized field experiment, Kraft and Dougherty (2013) had found that "teacher-family communication increased the odds that students completed their homework by 40%, decreased instances in which teachers had to redirect students' attention to the task at hand by 25%, and increased class participation rates by 15%" (p. 199). Thus, effective interaction between school and family can stimulate student engagement in a rather short period of time. Still, the outcome of such interaction widely depends on the strategy the educators choose to apply and on the aspects of interaction they choose to address in the first place.

Different small-scale studies in the field presented different aspects of interaction between school and family or teachers and parents. Thus, some of them provided evidence supporting the effectiveness of extracurricular activities that involve parents (Auerbach, 2009; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Among the activities that schools can utilize to stimulate family engagement parent workshops, sporting, cultural, and club activities, and coffee mornings were often mentioned. The list of such initiatives that encourage student family members to become more involved into the process of education, as the research showed, can be rather long. The major idea behind such initiatives, however, should be evident to parents:

they have to comprehend that enhanced collaboration between schools and parents, as well as their active participation and responsiveness, allows moving toward a common goal – enhanced academic achievement for the benefit of all students (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Additionally, as Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) theorized, "the strongest predictor of parent involvement is how parents conceptualize and construct their role, that is, what they think and do regarding their responsibility to support education" (as cited in Auerbach, 2009, p. 11). However, not all parents were found to be equally interested in taking part in extracurricular activities.

For instance, parents from "economically disadvantaged and/or ethnic minority groups" were the list likely to become involved in school activities (Mutch & Collins, 2012, p. 174). Similarly, young parents, parents from single-parent or large family settings, or those corresponding to such characteristics as "low educational attainment, high mobility rates [or] lack [of] time and resources" also were found to have low involvement rates (p. 174). To address these categories of parents, educators elaborated approaches alternative to extracurricular activities. With this regard it is rather relevant to outline the studies in the field, which make an accent on the importance of communication between teachers and student family members, simultaneously discussing the various approaches to communication and presenting practical examples of the most effective tactics to apply (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012). For example, several studies available were found, which provided "suggestive evidence that communicating with students' families by phone results in positive academic benefits" (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013, p. 202). In particular, the findings of one of the studies aimed at examining the relationship between calls and educational outcomes suggest that regular calls generate more parent-initiated contacts with teachers on the one hand and improve students' spelling performance on the other hand.

Text messages and written reports also can be used as a means for regular communication. Thus, as Kraft and Dougherty (2013) acknowledged, a small-scale study carried out in Texas had found that "sending individualized "monitoring" reports home to parents twice a week for 12 weeks increased homework completion and decreased disciplinary referrals among the treatment group" (p. 202). Other studies found evidence supporting the claim that parents prefer to receive regularly text messages that inform them about children's attendance or absence from school (Jensen, 2013; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). Thus, text messages can be used to communicate some urgent and/or relevant information to parents, so that they could use it to adjust the behavior of their children immediately, in the real time. Phone calls and written reports, on the other hand, can provide teachers with a greater flexibility. Along with relevant information, during the phone calls or in written reports, teachers can give parents some additional guidance on how to respond to some of the children's activities and/or how to help their children to improve their learning and to reach greater academic achievements.

## Factors Enhancing Parent Engagement

Designing efficient school-family or teacher-parent communication interventions is a challenging task that requires accurate planning. Additionally, the quality of such communication was found to depend on the effectiveness of communicator and the context in which the communication takes place (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). The process of communication is often complex and manifold. However, educators who aim at strengthening school-parent relationships, as Mutch and Collins (2012) had found, can get closer to this goal by paying attention to the following factors that can enhance and strengthen school-family relations: leadership, relationships, school culture, partnerships, community networks, and communication.

In order to unite parents and make them move toward some common goal – for instance, successful academic performance of the students – school has to assume leadership position. As Mutch and Collins (2012) argued, being a leader, which means being committed and guided by a clear vision while elaborating partnerships with all parents, a school can substantially improve the rates of parent and community engagement. From the practical perspective, schools can assume leadership positions by taking account of parents' major aspirations regarding their children and by incorporating these findings into the process of strategic planning. Schools which assume leadership positions were found to influence the behavior of parents and raise their engagement by utilizing explicit activities, such as reading evenings, picnics, coffee or tea mornings and meetings (Auerbach, 2009; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Such activities allow school staff to fulfill major leadership goals: to foster trusting relationships within community, to increase parents' confidence by removing barriers in communication, and providing numerous opportunities to take part in the decision making process to mention a few (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012).

Another factor that should be considered is the character of relationships. In order to develop long-lasting and effective relationships between staff members and parents, it was recommended to incorporate trust and respect as an integral part of every relationship (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Informal meetings with teaches at various school events and/or community performances were presented in literature as allowing elaboration of such relationships, because parents and teachers can get to know each other and informally discuss various aspects of their children's learning progress (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012).

Availability of trustful relationships, in turn, allows working upon development of durable learning partnerships. Partnership between parents and school staff is an integral part

of positive parent engagement, because, as studies suggest, "engagement between schools and parents… is strongly influenced by the extent to which school personnel and parents believe in and value partnerships that share responsibility for children's learning" (Mutch & Collins, 2012, p. 177). Numerous tactics can be incorporated to develop school-parents partnerships. However, the most successful of them require a school to be able to provide parents with a timely feedback on their children's progress and on the curriculum changes, of which suggested the findings of the studies under analysis (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012). On the one hand, by informing parents regularly regarding student's learning and achievement, schools can resolve any occurring issues, such as, for instance, misbehavior or failure to capture the presented material, immediately. On the other hand, timely notifications allow parents follow the children's process of learning, as well as take some part in it, for example, by assisting with home tasks.

Additionally, to be able to engage parents of all backgrounds, origins and believes, educators must support a positive school culture the intrinsic features of which include, but are not limited to "genuine openness to parent and community involvement, accessibility of school personal, and practices inclusive of diversity" (Mutch & Collins, 2012, p. 179). The greatest responsibility here is carried out by teachers and staff, as it is their actions that embody the culture of the whole institution (Auerbach, 2009). Thus, parents recognize the culture of the school through communication and interaction with teachers. Mutch and Collins (2012) suggested that to engage parents teachers should "display willingness to learn about the child's background and [show] an interest in the child's particular needs and interests" (p. 180). Usually, such behavior in teachers raises parent confidence and increases overall engagement and desire to be involved (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012).

In order to benefit students and to make parents more interested in cooperation upon attainment of common goals of learning and academic achievement in children, schools should strive to develop community networks (Mutch & Collins, 2012). To be successful, this process often requires a school to perform a range of activities "from seeking the perspectives of their communities to networking with key agencies to promoting formal networks" (p. 181). For instance, in context of community networks, schools can cooperate systematically with such external agents, as, for example, health professionals, artists, and representatives of other fields of activity (Phillips, 2015).

Finally, the last factor Mutch and Collins (2012) recommended to take under particular control was communication. By communication, the authors meant particular strategies that educators should implement to make their relations with parents more effective. In particular, they suggested that parents become more engaged in response to personalized and regular communication, which aims at transferring honest messages that contain "easy-to-understand information, sooner rather than later" (p. 182), so that they could preserve the chance to participate in decision making. Communication is often crucial for effective interaction between parents and the school. For this reason, it is of critical importance to indentify the right person in the school with whom parents can communicate effectively, because otherwise communication (rather lack of communication) can emerge as a serious issue (Clark, Tytler, & Symington, 2014). In addition, it is sound to support culturally inclusive communication approaches, which would provide parents of all backgrounds with the opportunity to support their children' learning and academic progress (Jensen, 2013; Phillips, 2015).

Along with enhancing parent engagement, these factors also produce influence on student engagement. If implemented, the mentioned recommendations are likely to improve student engagement, both directly and indirectly. Such effect is most likely to occur, because,

in accordance to the findings of numerous academic studies, students' engagement in educational process is "continuously shaped by their relationships with adults [which includes parents and teachers in the first place] and their schooling environment" (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013, p. 201). Strong social networks, including school-family and/or teacher-parent relationships and interactions, were found to promote "students' self-efficacy and positive behavior" (Wang & Neihart, 2015, p. 156). Consequentially, they were often presented as contributing to student motivation, which underpins engagement (Kim et al., 2015).

## Learning Community

Many of the mentioned factors acknowledged the need to reshape the whole community, making activities carried out within the community to become directed upon the purpose of academic achievement promotion. On the one hand, this tendency would extend the character of parent involvement. On the other hand, it would allow schools to fulfill one of the major goals of education. As Auerbach (2009) stated, "school has a responsibility not only to children's learning and development but to the overall improvement of family and community life" (p. 17). For this reason, it was sound to place community transformation and contribution into the development of learning community as a separate factor that could produce considerable influence on student engagement (Phillips, 2015). By encouraging the development of a learning community, or, in other words, such a community that promotes knowledge and praises and encourages academic achievement, educators can extend the practical value of knowledge and education in students, thus particularly enhancing cognitive and emotional dimensions of the concept of student engagement.

Both theoretical data and practical outcomes suggested that the efforts aimed at development of learning communities were often fruitful (Auerbach, 2009; Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Jensen, 2013; Phillips, 2015). Known as "supplementary or complementary approach

to education," cooperation between school and community allowed combining in-school and out-of-school resources to benefit the youth (Bathgate & Silva, 2010, p. 67). Such cooperation was often fruitful, because it reinforced students' academic knowledge, contributed to personal experiences of students, and revealed to students the value of their education in the real life context. Additionally, it contributed to the perceived relevance of instruction, as students were more likely to become engaged with authentic academic work that "intellectually [involved] them in a process of meaningful inquiry to solve real life problems that [extended] beyond the classroom" (Shernoff et al., 2003, p. 159). School-community cooperation can assume different forms. Thus, for instance, Phillips (2015) presented a set of initiatives directed on the creation of a learning community, which, as the instances of implementation showed, were likely to lead to strengthened student engagement, along with cultivation of language and literacy learning. As defined by Frazier and Eighmy (2012), learning community was a "relationship that combines experiential and reflective learning" (p. 11). The initiatives presented by Phillips (2015) fell under three major categories – stories, places, and interests – which, on the one hand, denote the context within which the activities are expected to be carried out, and, on the other hand, point out the character of the experience that should be shared by the members of learning communities.

Practical approaches toward development of learning communities that were grouped under the category titled 'stories' include story circle, story café and family story journals (Phillips, 2015). The author claimed that, at the place of implementation, each of these approaches had already produced positive influence on student performance, particularly by engaging students into the creative process of storytelling and experience sharing and by encouraging the development of their imagination and language and speaking skills. Organizing story circles is relevant in terms of class setting, where the number of members is quite limited. It is rather effective to invite student family members to participate in such

circles and take part in sharing family stories (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Phillips, 2015). Story café, on the other hand, can unite communities with a greater number of members. However, the idea that lies in the essence of the approach is widely similar to that of the story circle. Unlike the mentioned initiatives, which encourage oral communication in the first place, family story journals were presented as a means for the development of creative writing skills (Phillips, 2015).

The second category united activities that were related with the utilization of common places – neighborhood walks, community garden, environmental care, and community art. As Phillips (2015) explained, "connection to community places is something that families and staff at a school can collaborate together to create" (p. 40). Apart from this, activities in this category enable students to engage into the learning process beyond the classroom setting, which strengthens the connection with the community and encourages students to see the community s an audience beyond the classroom (Dietrich & Balli, 2014). Each of the activities presented, on the one hand, contributes to the development of some particular set of skills and, on the other hand, reveals to students the real-world value of the tasks performed (Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Phillips, 2015).

Environmental care tactic allows students to unite in groups, like local bush care group or water catchment group, with family members, school staff, and representatives of various environmental organizations. While caring for the environment, students involved can develop their active vocabulary to great extent, simultaneously expanding their water and bush care knowledge. Neighborhood walk is an activity that invites students to unite into groups with family members and teachers to explore and present different interesting places within the neighborhood (Phillips, 2015). This activity can help students develop considerable amount of skills as it may require them to consult different local experts, to compose coherent reports that contain historical facts, inside knowledge, and/or geographical

land features among other interesting details about the neighborhood places. Apart from this, neighborhood walks, while expanding the educational process beyond the bounds of the classroom and providing students with considerable autonomy, contribute to the development of cognitive student engagement by increasing students' willingness to make efforts necessary in order to master the new knowledge and skills (Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Jang et al., 2010; Phillips, 2015). Finally, the last activity, which was proposed in the 'places' category, is community garden (Phillips, 2015). Either based on the school grounds or somewhere within the borders of local community, this activity was presented as a good way of "bringing people together for a shared objective of cultivating edible produce to share and use in sustainable living practices" (p. 40). Likewise the mentioned activities, this one was found to contribute positively into the students' leaning. As Remmen and Froyland (2014) found in their research, students who actively engage with such phenomena outdoors develop "deeper cognitive and affective leaning" (p. 104). Thus, in-class learning serves as a preparation, while the beyond-class activities serve as supportive follow-ups that correspond to the curriculum goals.

The last category of activities was united around interests as common experience to share and included cultural groups, arts projects and events, and local community concerns (Phillips, 2015). By encouraging student to take part in cultural groups, educators can expand cultural understanding and cultivate diversity inclusive behaviors and practices. In addition, by supporting groups that investigate different cultures, they motivate students to learn languages and to extend their knowledge regarding culture specific traditions and celebrations (Auerbach, 2009; Phillips, 2015). Cultural groups are especially effective in enhancing the sense of belonging in students, which corresponds to the emotional dimension of engagement, and, thus, they contribute to student engagement in context of diverse communities. Through participation in arts, projects and events, students can learn how to

express themselves through arts, "offering richly layered decoding, meaning-making, usage and analysis of diverse complex texts" (Phillips, 2015, p. 41). The character of the projects from this subcategory can be diverse and include such activities as dance, film, theater, parades, and festivals to mention a few. Finally, local community concerns that occur from time to time also unite people and motivate them to come together to take some action. Educators should encourage students and their families to participate in local community concerns, which may include such events and activities as community meetings, networking, social media, petitions, letter writing, and media interviews among others (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Phillips, 2015). On the one hand, taking part in such activities enables students to polish their skills in a range of language and literacy practices (Phillips, 2015). On the one hand, it contributes to student engagement, making them an integral part of the learning community, united under a shared goal to communicate its needs to those who hold the authority (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012).

As Phillips (2015) accentuated, each of the mentioned activities encourages the development of the learning community and contributes to the students and families' sense of engagement into the learning process. Being less personalized than teacher-parent or teacher-student communication, the mentioned interventions still can and should be utilized by schools as extracurricular activities. Furthermore, as Zhao and Kuh (2004) had found, student participation in some form of learning community is positively related with student success, including such areas as "enhanced academic performance and integration of academic and social experiences" (p. 132). Evidently, it may turn out to be rather effective to implement the mentioned interventions along with other efforts aimed at enhancement of family and student engagement.

## Teacher-Student Interaction

Another factor that was shown to produce considerable influence on student engagement was teacher-student interaction (Burgess, 2015; Jang et al., 2010; Jensen, 2013; Swiderski, 2011). It happens quite often that the student is completely engaged in the process of learning when attending one class, but shows no engagement during some other class. Usually, the difference in the level of engagement occurs because of the teacher's behavior and his/her instructional style. As Jang and colleagues (2010) acknowledged, "when students engage in classroom learning, there is almost always some aspect of the teacher's behavior that plays a role in the initiation and regulation of the engagement" (p. 588). Wang and Neihart (2015) presented the impact of teacher-student interaction on engagement and, therefore, achievement, in a more explicit manner – they stated in their study that, "students who experienced high levels of warmth and support or low levels of conflict in teacher-student interactions had better achievement" (p. 148). Similarly, Reyes and colleagues (2012) found in their research that there was a positive relationship between classroom emotional climate, student engagement, and, correspondingly, academic achievement. Although student disengagement and poor performance had been attributed to the student by some researchers (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006), Reyes et al. (2012) indicated by their research that student engagement and academic performance to great extent depended on how teachers promoted classroom interactions. Supportive teachers who created a positive emotional climate for learning demonstrated that the classroom was a safe and valuable place to be and were enthusiastic about learning. As a result, students felt "more connected and engaged in learning, and [became] more successful academically" (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 709). Such impact of teacher-student interaction on student performance in class is natural, as people are social creatures, who possess the need for forming relationships with others.

The students' relations with their teachers are found to produce a particular effect on student emotional engagement. Reyes and colleagues (2012) pointed out the importance of teachers' emotional availability; "emotionally available teachers have students who feel a sense of belonging and become emotionally attached and engaged in the learning process" (p. 709). Thus, students, who believed that their teacher accepted them and believed they were valuable, "feel more comfortable, are happier in class, and feel happy in participating in class activities (Guvenc, 2015, p. 649). In contrast, students who were ignored by their teachers were often unhappy and were more likely to be "bored during learning activities" (p. 649). Another study suggested that even an "increased interest on the part of the instructor [resulted in] an increase in student comfort, which facilitated increased participation and risk taking on the part of some students" (Rodriguez-Keyes, Schneider, & Keenan, 2013, p. 796). When examining students academic engagement from the perspective of teacher-student interaction, many researchers tended to investigate "supportive socio-contextual factors," such as teacher's instructional style, "which is generally conceptualized as a stable pattern in a teacher's methods of instruction," classroom management, and interpersonal style with students (Jang et al., 2010, p. 588). In order to comprehend the way teacher-student interaction influences student academic engagement, it is sound to examine peculiarities of teacher performance in terms of these socio-contextual factors.

## Teacher's Instructional Style

In their research, Jang et al. (2010) made an attempt to examine two aspects of teacher's instructional style – provision of autonomy support (i.e., in contrast to being controlling) and provision of structure (i.e., in contrast to chaos) – as examples of engagement-promoting practices. As the reviewed body of research on the topic suggested, when support of students' autonomous motives, such as, for example, preferences, needs, personal goals, and interests, is a major teacher's focus in context of learning and activity,

then instructional acts tend to support students' engagement "by presenting interesting and relevant learning activities, providing optimal challenges, highlighting meaningful learning goals, and supporting students; volitional endorsement of classroom behaviors (p. 588). Another study aimed at investigation of the influence of teacher's instructional style on students' in-class behavior found that "increasingly student-centered, interactive, and comprehensive [instruction] was associated with students engaging at higher levels of cognitive demand, with higher levels of attention, interest and communication" (Bock & Erickson, 2015, p. 149). In contrast, "instruction that was teacher-directed and focused on skill mastery and acquisition" was found to produce an opposite to the described effect (p. 149).

Found evidence also suggested that autonomy-supportive teachers are more likely to motivate students, as they often utilize tasks that correspond to students' sense of challenge and curiosity (Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Jang et al., 2010). They often create opportunities for students to take the initiative during learning activities, by utilizing informative and flexible messages to provide an explanatory rational, rather than controlling and pressuring (Jang et al., 2010). As the reviewed literature suggested, "students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, along with their sense of efficacy, are malleable and are likely to influence engagement" (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013, p. 201). According to Reyes et al. (2012), students are more engaged in student-controlled versus teacher-controlled learning activities. Thus, teacher's instructional style, which supports student autonomy and provides clear structure of the learning activity, was found to encourage engagement.

### Classroom Management Style

As for the structure, high structure, which suggests communication of clear expectations in a manner that frames students' learning activity with exhaustively clear directions and guidance, but still leaves some control over how they learn by providing an

opportunity to choose among options available to students, was considered to be particularly engagement-promoting (Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Jang et al., 2010). On the one hand, it allows managing students' behaviors and, on the other hand, it prevents chaos during transitions (Jang et al., 2010). Although Jang and colleagues tended to examine teacher-provided structure in context of teacher's instructional style, this concept has been studied extensively in context of classroom management as a socio-contextual factor, contributing to engagement as one of the lesson's characteristics (Dietrich & Balli, 2014). As a classroom management style, structure can be also analyzed from the perspective of motivation. With regard to student motivation, teacher-provided structure (or high structure) helps students to further develop a "sense of perceived control over school outcome – that is, to develop perceived competence, an internal locus of control... and an optimistic attributional style" (Jang et al., 2010, p. 589). In other words, high structure contributes to engagement because it motivates students to become more involved in learning activities.

Teachers, who act in terms of high structure, assume instructional behavior that corresponds to the three following characteristics: to "present clear, understandable, explicit, and detailed directions…. [to] offer a program of action to guide students' ongoing activity…. [and to] offer constructive feedback on how students can gain control over valued outcomes" (Jang et al., 2010, p. 590). Additionally, as Reyes et al. (2012) pointed out, it is useful to distinguish between the whole group instruction and the small group and/ or individual instruction, because "whole group instruction tends to be perceived by students as teacher-controlled, whereas small group and/or individual instruction are perceived as relatively student controlled" (p. 160). Through such behavior, teachers attain and maintain a leadership position and effectively assist students in their learning. As a result, a wide body of reviewed evidence showed that, compared to chaotic, structured teachers display positive educational outcomes (Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Jang et al., 2010).

### Teacher's Interpersonal Style and Student's Socio-Economic Status

Socio-economic status is a sociological term that is applied to refer to the relative position of an individual or a family in a hierarchy of social structure. Depending on the status, an individual or a family enjoy varying degrees of access to or control over wealth, power, and prestige (Ezeala-Harrison, 1996; Willms, 2011). Socio-economic status influences greatly lifestyles of families, creating considerable gap between those living in low-income households, those belonging to middle class, and those from the high-income households. As far as student engagement is considered, studies were reviewed, which claimed that it is important to recognize that socio-economic background may influence the way children act at school. Particularly, children who grow up in poverty are at greater risk of experiencing difficulties in school adjustment (Jensen, 2013; Lee & Bierman, 2015).

As Jensen (2013) acknowledged, students from low income households were more likely to struggle with engagement then those from middle class and/or from the high-income households. Among children raised in low-income families, "as many as 40% demonstrate delays in learning behaviors and emergent literacy skills, and over 20% exhibit high rates of social difficulties" (Lee & Bierman, 2015, p. 383). Particularly, there were seven major peculiarities in behavior of children from low-income families, through addressing which, teachers could help their students better engage in the process of learning. Jensen pointed out that understanding these differences, which included, but were often not limited to health-related issues (i.e., which negatively affect children's abilities to engage effectively in the learning process); poor vocabulary (i.e., which results in resistance to engagement into certain learning activities, such as reading); and prejudiced biases (i.e., which prevent teachers from accurately assessing the student's real, rather than class-associated, learning capabilities, is the first step upon the way of elaborating a proper mitigating response). While providing recommendations aimed at directing teacher's efforts on elimination of negative

outcomes of low socioeconomic status on learning, Jensen accentuated on the importance of teacher-student communication and teacher's sincere interest in both student's learning and student's personality. Depending on the way teachers interact with their students, they "leave permanent impressions on students" (Mesquita, Coutinho, De Martin-Silva, Parente, Faria, & Afonso, 2015, p. 658). This aspect of teacher-student interaction was found to be sound in context of a wider body of reviewed research (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Conner, 2011; Jang et al., 2010; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Lee & Bierman, 2015; Phillips, 2015).

### Implementing Technological Advances into Teacher's Instructional Style

Being an integral part of daily life in the twenty-first century, technology arrives into the classroom and assists teachers in their efforts to make the learning process more engaging. Comprehensively, the impact of technology on student engagement in general and students' learning outcomes in particular had been widely examined within recent past and continues to be a matter of intensive examination, because of great potential of application of technological advances in studying and learning (Burgess, 2015; Canada, Sanguino, Cuervos, & Santos, 2014; Conradi, 2014; Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Eddy & Patton, 2010; Stroud, Drayton, Hobbs, & Falk, 2014). Although in the reviewed studies, the researchers investigated multiple aspects of technology application either to enhance student engagement or to stimulate student learning and academic achievement, most of their findings were found to share a common feature: they suggested that technology in the classroom immediately grabs students' attention because it offers novelty, variety, and greater functionality compared to lessons taught in a traditional manner (Conradi, 2014; Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Eddy & Patton, 2010).

Implementation of technology into the teacher's instructional style is found to extend considerably the set of approaches a teacher may utilize to engage students (Burgess, 2015; Canada et al., 2014). Additionally, technology can effectively enhance teacher-student

communication. For instance, technological advances can be utilized to provide students with an online feedback on the completed tasks. As the study conducted by Parkin, Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, and Thorpe (2012) showed, publication of grades and feedback online enabled students "to take ownership and control of their own learning, setting personal goals and planning ahead" (p. 967). However, as some practical evidence suggests, technology can also lead to decrease in student engagement into the learning process. Overall, the outcome produced by technology application was found to be widely dependant on a set of factors, including teacher's proficiency in using technology, the extent of students' access to and control of the technology, and exhaustiveness of teacher-provided instructions and directions to mention a few (Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Jang et al., 2010; Stroud et al., 2014).

## Summary

The presented literature review aimed at gaining a clear conceptualization of the phenomenon of student engagement and at examining and systematizing major factors influencing this phenomenon in context of educational process. The analyzed academic data showed that, due to its complexity, the concept of student engagement finds different interpretations and arrives to slightly or, sometimes, considerably different conceptualizations in the discussed studies. This is found to occur as a result of the researchers' overwhelming focus on particular aspects of student learning, such as techniques or approaches to particular situations and/or applications of tools and technologies to mention a few. Depending on the researcher's conceptualizations of student engagement, different aspects were proposed as influencing engagement and different approaches were presented as a means to stimulate student academic performance through enhanced engagement.

The outlined factors were systematized and grouped with regard to the environments and relationships to which they belong and within which they occur: classroom context versus external environment and teacher-parent-student efforts (i.e., teacher-parent

communication) versus teacher-student efforts (i.e., teacher-student communication). Roughly all of the discussed factors, which include family and parents engagement, community engagement and development of learning community, teacher's instructional style, classroom management style, implementation of technology, and teacher's interpersonal style in context of student's socio-economic background, suggest of the interpersonal character of student engagement and of its great dependence on the interaction between people as part of the external to learning environment.

The conducted review showed that most of the literature in the field assumed or discussed the benefits of student engagement from the perspective of teachers and school. The student voice on the topic, on the other hand, was found to be strikingly underrepresented. Thus, exploration of the concept of student engagement from the perspective of students and closer examination of the student role and identity in different educational contexts may be rather fruitful. Additionally, the reviewed data showed that most of the studies are rather limited in terms of both time and geography. This suggests of the need for extensive longitudinal experiments and studies that can be used to compare and analyze the outcomes that are not limited to single class in single learning context. The initiation of such studies will allow capturing and developing a national picture of student engagement. Finally, as the review revealed, there is a strong need in elaboration of a locally grounded but still internationally validated conceptualization of student engagement. Lack of such conceptualization, which can be tested and improved in various classroom contexts, contributes to the chaotic character of the existing research.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Research Purpose and Questions

Depending on their purpose, different kinds of studies require development of specific research questions. An exploratory study is considered to be a valuable means of finding out "what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light" (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, p. 139). Given that the topic of student engagement is well presented in contemporary academic literature, it is sound to conduct an exploratory study, which assumes the form of secondary, or desk, research and involves the examination of the available literature, with the aim of gaining a clear understanding of the phenomenon under analysis. Additionally, literature review allows making the initially broad focus of the research progressively narrower as the research proceeds.

Unlike the exploratory research, the descriptive study requires a researcher to have a clear picture of the phenomenon on which the data is intended to be collected. Overall, the descriptive study is a research the aim of which is "to portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 140). Such definition corresponds to the aims of current research. However, often, this kind of research is either an extension of an exploratory research or a forerunner of a piece of explanatory research. It is rarely an end in itself and, more often, a means to an end, which is eventually reached through the explanatory research. The explanatory study, in general, is a study which establishes "causal relationships between variables" (p. 140). It is relevant to undertake such study when the aim of the research is to explain the relationship between the variables, for instance, to explain the reasons why certain behavior is occurring in certain circumstances. It is sound to combine descriptive and explanatory research in a common effort of producing new relevant knowledge on student engagement, because such combination allows greater insight into the

character of phenomenon, the boundaries of which are not completely clear and distinguishable from the context of its occurrence.

The purpose of this study was to gain descriptive and explanatory answers to the questions ‘how’ and ‘why’ as pertaining to student engagement in context of the examined classroom. With regard to this purpose, the following research questions were developed:

1. What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning during the semester?
2. What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?
3. How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context?

These questions were used as a lens though which the collected data were analyzed and the research findings were reported. They were developed to fully correspond to the aim of the current research, which is outlining specific factors that influence student engagement in a classroom setting and elaborating recommendations for teachers to apply in order to raise the levels of student engagement in their classes and schools.

## The Research Design

In order to assure the effectiveness of the research and reliability of the findings, Saunders and colleagues (2009) recommend utilizing the concept of the research onion, which is presented in Figure 1 below, while elaborating the methodological approach for the study. This ‘onion’ vividly portrays the aspects of the research that should be clarified prior to the processes of data collection and data analysis, as they serve as a frame for new knowledge generation.

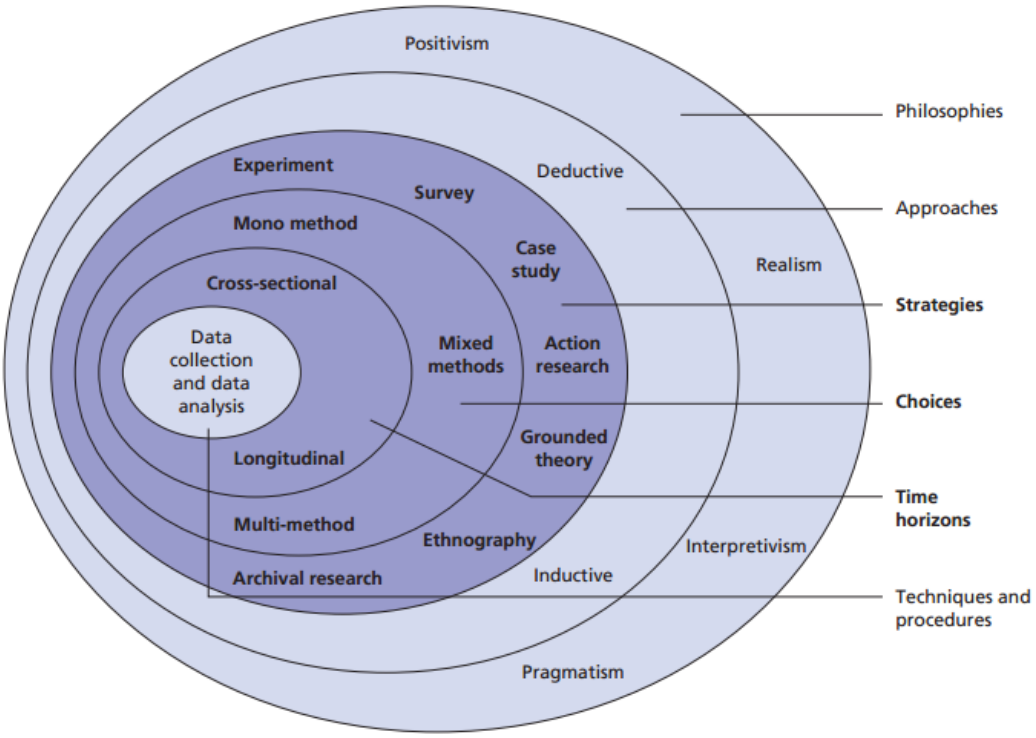


*Figure 1*. The Research Onion (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 138)

The research onion is rather convenient, because it allows visualizing the whole research paradigm as a combination of layers, where particular techniques and procedures aimed at data collection and analysis belong in the very center of the research 'onion.' Such presentation of the layers suggests that "questions of method are secondary to the questions of paradigm" (p. 106), which calls for the need to place current research on student engagement in context of particular philosophical framework that enables development of new reliable knowledge. Thus, prior to discussing the strategy and a set of techniques employed to examine, outline, and analyze particular factors facilitating student engagement, it is necessary to clarify philosophical underpinnings of the undertaken research.

## Research Paradigm, Philosophy, and Approach

Given the character of the phenomenon investigated, it is relevant to base the methodological approach to study on the constructivist paradigm, which is built on the premise of "a social construction of reality" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). Interpretivism is relevant, thus, as a major research philosophy, because it allows viewing the nature of reality

as socially constructed, subjective and multiple. This philosophy is particularly applicable to the research on student engagement because it allows the researcher "to enter the social world of research subjects and understand their world from their point of view" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 116). Although the topic of student engagement can be distinguished as one enjoying particular attention and one which is quite frequently discussed in academic literature nowadays, student voice on the issue remains widely underrepresented. Evidently, conducting the research from the interpretivist perspective allows viewing students as social actors whose behavior, particularly engagement into learning, can be evaluated as a subjective response to particular circumstances, such as social interactions between school and family, and teacher and student, and/or approach to the teaching process. In context of the chosen philosophy and paradigm in general, the new knowledge, which is going to be generated as an outcome of the undertaken study, reveals the social phenomena through the focus upon the details of situation, explaining the reality behind these details, as well as subjective meanings that motivate certain actions. As Saunders and colleagues acknowledged, this philosophy often corresponds to qualitative research, with small samples and in-depth investigations as major data collection techniques. The great advantage of choosing constructivism as a paradigm, and interpretivism as a philosophy is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participants, which enables the last to reveal their stories, thus describing their views of reality.

As far as the research approach is considered, induction seems to be sounder in context of interpretivism. Although Saunders and colleagues (2009) claimed that "such labeling is potentially misleading and of no real practical value" (p. 124), moving from data to theory can be rather beneficial while studying student engagement, because inductive approach makes an emphasis on the close understanding of the research context and the meanings humans attach to particular events, has more flexible structure than deductive

approach, and heavily relies on the collection of qualitative data. The effectiveness of such research is assured by clearly defined research questions in context of comprehensive and clear research purpose.

## The Research Strategy

The process of examining student engagement and factors that impact it is virtually impossible in the laboratory setting, because the boundaries between the phenomenon and its real life context (i.e., the classroom, the school, the teacher-student interaction, the teacher-parent interaction) are not clearly evident. For this reason, it is sound to choose the case study as a major research strategy. According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when the researcher "cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study" and wants to cover contextual conditions as "relevant to the phenomenon under study" (as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). While examining the particular factors that engage students about the school experience, it is impossible to completely control and manipulate the behavior of students, as well as to retrieve them from the classroom and/or school settings. This suggests the intrinsic correlation between the phenomenon of student engagement and classroom (and/or school) as its real life context. It is impossible to have a true picture of student engagement without considering a context within which it occurs. Additionally, the case study strategy is especially relevant in context of explanatory and/or exploratory research (Saunders et al., 2009). Although, depending on the type, different categories of case studies can be applied to fulfill explanatory, exploratory, and/or descriptive purposes of the research. The presented statements fully justify the utilization of case study strategy in the undertaken study.

According to Robson (2002), case study was a strategy "for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (as cited in Saunders et al., 2009, p. 145).

This strategy has a considerable ability to generate answers to the question ‘why’. However, it can also be applied to answer the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions. In terms of this strategy, the case is “a unit of analysis,” which is broadly defined as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). The case often becomes delineated by the research questions. However, it is necessary to further bind the case, for instance, by time and place, by time and activity, and/or by definition and context, in order to ensure that the questions are not too broad and the number of objectives is not too great for one study. As Baxter and Jack acknowledged, “the establishment of boundaries in a qualitative case study design is similar to the development of inclusive and exclusive criteria for sample selection in a quantitative study” (p. 547). Small samples, limitations in time and place, and specific context can be mentioned as major boundaries in the current research. Overall, multiple cases are going to be incorporated in the research to ensure that the findings are of universal character. Explanatory case studies with small samples are chosen as a means to find an explanation to the presumed causal links in real life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies.

## The Case

The research took place at Rippowam Middle School in Stamford, Connecticut. The participants for the study were chosen among seventh grade students. In this particular case the process of selection of the participants depended on two criteria: 1) students’ school/class attendance, and 2) average grade. These criteria were chosen as indicating student engagement. Particularly, high-achieving students, those whose average grades were higher than C during the current school year, were observed, surveyed, and selectively interviewed. The intentionally chosen purposeful sample allowed the researcher to better understand the studied phenomenon and outline specific factors that associate with enhancement of student engagement within the examined setting.

The students comprising the sample of this case study were asked to participate in a survey, one of the purposes of which was to find out which specific activities and experiences attracted students into learning during the school year. The students were proposed to choose among such options as the quality of teacher instruction, the use of technology by the teachers and/or by the students, availability and character of feedback from teachers, extra-curricular activities such as sports, clubs, and concerts, the school climate and its capability to encourage social and emotional well-being, and family engagement to mention a few. Additionally, the students were encouraged to clarify the extent to which one or another option contributed to their overall enjoyment with school and learning experience. Apart from this, some randomly selected participants were asked to participate in focus group interviews.

## Description of Participants

Carried out online and administered via *Google Docs*, the survey was completed by the seventh grade students of Rippowam Middle School in Stamford, Connecticut. Two classes made up of 30 students each were chosen for the research. The survey response rate was 100% (n=60). The students were diverse in ethnicity, as presented in *Figure 2* below.

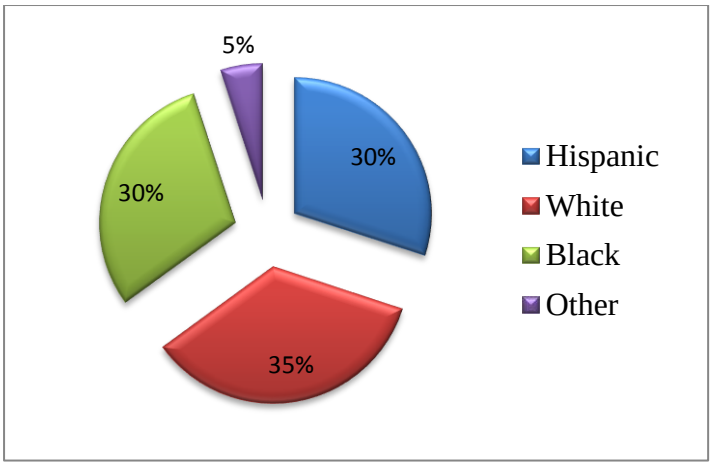


*Figure 2.* Demographics of Students

In addition, it is important to mention the socioeconomic status of students' families as an important factor in the research. The study showed that students' socioeconomic background

indirectly affected student engagement. For instance, in families where parents worked two jobs and attributed less attention to children supervision, attendance issues were found. The school refers to a high poverty district, and about 46% of the school population is on free or reduced lunch. As estimated, about 40% of study sample refers to this category of students. One of the major reasons for choosing the students of the mentioned classes as a study sample is that this group of students was the only group to which the researcher had access.

The second stage of data collection was carried out through a focus group interview. The focus group consisted of four students randomly chosen from the study sample. In the paragraphs that follow, a brief description of the focus group participants is presented. In addition, in order to promote one's understanding of the major themes extrapolated from the collected data, brief description of students' perspectives on engagement is also provided.

In the beginning of the interview, the students were asked to briefly present themselves. Afterwards, the researcher asked the students to define engagement into learning in their own way. The researcher did not provide the participants with the definition, instead asking questions in order to help students outline what they liked about learning, which activities captivated them the most, and what things distracted them from learning and from doing homework. In context of the conversation, each of the participants had an opportunity to speak and refer to his/her own experience and knowledge. For ethical reasons, pseudonyms are used to refer to the focus group participants.

Alaina described herself as a very communicative student, who loved social aspects of school. While reporting that she liked socializing with her friends at school, Alaina admitted that, in general, she considered schooling and attending most of the classes to be boring. Despite recognizing the importance of learning and education, Alaina thought that, in most cases, school provided her with facts that she would not use in life. Further discussion revealed that Alaina attended little extracurricular activities, because she helped her mother to

carry for a younger sister. Alaina responded that student engagement is when the student likes to take part in learning and enjoys activities.

Mark reported that he valued his education a lot, especially learning that would be useful in his future life. Still, he also admitted that his purpose was to excel in all of his classes. He reported that he enjoyed the challenges correlated with some of the classes, as they motivated him to push himself farther as a learner. This, Mark thought, would help him in the future to pursue the desired education and, eventually, career. When asked to define engagement into learning, Mark responded that being engaged means being enthusiastic about learning, recognizing the importance of education in the long-term perspective, and striving to surpass oneself while taking part in schooling activities.

Cayla also reported that she placed a high value on education. She admitted that she enjoyed attending school, where she can meet her friends, learn new information, and take part in interesting activities. Cayla admitted that her parents supported her greatly, encouraging her to excel in school so that she could than excel in life. Cayla responded that student engagement is a willingness to participate in learning activities and desire to be an active part the school's social life.

David reported that he liked attending school and socializing with friends. He liked learning; however, some classes seemed boring for him. In particular, he did not like the great amount of homework he had to do. In addition, David admitted that during some classes he could not concentrate on tasks because they were stupid and boring. David defined engagement as capability to learn while completing interesting tasks and discussing interesting information. He said that being engaged means being absorbed in the tasks and activities.

## Data Collection Methods

In order to reach the purposes of the research, the researcher utilized several methods of qualitative data collection in context of the outlined case study: observation, survey, and semi-structured interview (see Table 1).

Table 1.

*Data Collection Methods by Research Question*

| Research Question | Data Collection Method |
|---|---|
| 1. What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning during the semester? | ➢ Survey<br>➢ Focus group interview |
| 2. What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school? | ➢ Survey<br>➢ Focus group interview |
| 3. How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context? | ➢ Focus group interview<br>➢ Observation |

Collection of data through the presented methods will allow eliminating the possible overlapping areas, as well as outlining major and minor themes in the research. It will allow assessing both student engagement in a chosen group of student and factors influencing it from different perspectives.

### Survey

Survey was utilized as a major means of verbalized data collection on student engagement (see Appendix A for a copy of this instrument). Carried out online, it was administered via *Google Docs*. This method of data collection was chosen because it allows examining individual opinions regarding the issue under attention. To further enhance the likelihood of survey to reflect personal views of the participants, both unstructured (i.e.,

open-ended) and structured (i.e., fixed choice) questions were utilized. In an open-ended question, the participant supplies the answer on his/her own, which means that such question "does not constrain individual responses" (Creswell, 2012, p. 387). Fixed choice questions, on the other hand, are easier for respondents to complete, are less time consuming for the respondent, and are easier to analyze, as, for the analysis of data collected through structure items, software programs, such as Excel and SPSS, can be effectively utilized (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Additionally, the response rates are often higher for the structured, rather than unstructured surveys. For this reason, both fixed choice and open-ended questions were utilized to ensure that the collected data reflects student engagement and factors that enhance it from the perspective of students.

Being a qualitative study, the survey did not aim at establishing frequencies. Instead, it aimed at determining the diversity of perspectives within a chosen context. Rather than calculating the values of variables, this survey aimed at establishing the meaningful variation of values within the studied sample in a chosen setting. The survey involved only one empirical cycle due to relatively good prior knowledge on the phenomenon under attention. Still, the obtained results, which involved categorization of the responses into themes, were used to generate hypotheses, which were further tested through the interviews.

**Focus Group Interview**

Focus group interview was chosen as the second method of data collection (see Appendix B for a copy of the protocol). On the one hand, this method allows better control over the type of information received by the researcher, as the researcher can "ask specific question to elicit [particular] information" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Thus, the researcher is the one who determines the direction an interview is likely to assume. On the other hand, focus group interview allows participants to better describe personal information and/or their point of view on the investigated phenomenon. Group discussion is the distinguishing feature

of this kind of interview (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), in context of which the interviewees are encouraged to respond to each other and, thus, develop a discussion on the investigated topic. In light of estimation of student engagement patterns and factors that influence them, the application of this kind of interview is particularly promising as a means to gain insight into the views and experiences of students.

Still, as a method of data collection, interview is related with certain disadvantages. For instance, the collected data may be deceptive and "provide the perspective the interviewee wants the researcher to hear" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Additionally, the presence of the researcher can affect the way an interviewee responds. To lessen the likelihood of occurrence of these disadvantages and increase the possibility of collection of the honest, truthful data, focus group interview type was chosen for the study. As Conway (2014) acknowledged, focus group interview can effectively serve as both "analysis and data collection" (p. 274). Conducted at such a period of time, when the researcher has already begun preliminary analysis of earlier collected data, it enables to use the focus group to follow up on early findings.

A group of four randomly chosen students comprised a focus group with which a semi-structured interview was conducted. All the participants were encouraged to talk and to take their turns. To ensure the clarity of data collection, the interview was first audiotaped and, afterwards, transcribed. The focus group interview was utilized to test the hypotheses that were made based on the data collected through the survey.

**Observation**

Observation was chosen as one of the methods of data collection because it allows collecting information immediately as it occurs within the studied setting (Creswell, 2012). Thus, the collected data is likely to reflect actual behavior patterns. It is also convenient, because it allows analyzing attitudes of those students who have difficulties in verbalizing

their ideas based on their behavior. Furthermore, observation contributes to the elimination of the researcher bias from the data collection process. Becoming a participant observer, the researcher gains a better understanding of the shared by the participants practices, meanings, and values in context of the examined social setting, as well as interrelations between the participants and the behaviors they reflect (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). In other words, observation clarifies peculiarities of culture and relationships in a group of participants observed within a studied context. Unlike other methods of data collection employed in context of this study, observation provides data obtained through elicitation as opposed to "volunteered information" (p. 68). Thus, it eliminates the likelihood of occurrence of the participant bias in presentation of information.

A changing observational role was assumed by the researcher during the application of this method of data collection. Thus, during the early phases of the study, the researcher acted as a nonparticipant observer. As Creswell (2012) pointed out, in terms of this role, the observer is an "outsider who sits on the periphery or some advantageous place (e.g., the back of the classroom) to watch and record the phenomenon under study" (p. 215). This role was particular comfortable, as it allowed clarifying the final sample for the survey. As the research proceeded, the role of the researched shifted to become a participant observer. This required engaging into activities within a study sire and simultaneous recording of the observed information. As Conway (2014) acknowledged, observation is a valuable tool for triangulation of data collected through the application of other methods: "by comparing participants' observed actions with their perspectives as revealed through interviews… a researcher can learn a great deal about unnoticed, implied, or unvoiced rules or relationships" (p. 228). During the process of data analysis, ongoing short observations, which were carried out throughout the period of study and involved collection of data on each individual

participant and on all the participants as a group, enabled easier movement from general to specific and easier categorization of data collected through other methods.

## Data Analysis Methods

As any qualitative research, this study was expected to generate considerable amount of written text, which should be analyzed with the application of software programs. In particular, computer-assisted data analysis included such activities as making notes, writing up, editing, storing data, searching and retrieving data, linking data, performing content analysis, displaying data, and drawing and verifying conclusions to mention a few. Emerging concepts, categories, and themes were coded and edited throughout the process. The following data analysis methods were utilized to draw conclusions from the collected raw data.

### Constant Comparative

As Powell (2004) admitted, the constant comparative method is usually recognized as one of the most effective means of content analysis. It often involves continuing review of data. It involves and iterative and recursive process in which the researcher reads and re-reads data (Conway, 2014). This method consists of four major stages: "1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) delimiting the theory, and 4) writing the theory" (Powell, 2004, p. 155). In other words, this method allows both analyzing qualitative data by combining it into meaningful categories and conducting a simultaneous comparison of the units of meaning obtained.

This method of data analysis was utilized in the current research for two major purposes. On the one hand, it was used for inductive category coding. On the other hand, it was applied to compare the categories generated through the different methods of data collection. The application of this method allowed comparison of earlier made conclusions

with the newly emerged ideas. Particularly, conclusions made based on data from the survey were tested by the conclusions made through observation and interview.

Overall, coding is the most important tool for qualitative data analysis. It is particularly applicable to the analysis of data collected in the form of interview transcripts and field notes of observations (Conway, 2014). The essential idea of coding is to initially divide the collected data into segments and then to categorize the segments into broader ideas, categories, and themes, relevant for comprehension and explanation of the phenomenon under study. As Boeije (2010) acknowledged, it is sound to start qualitative data analysis with open coding and axial coding as "means to break up the data into smaller parts and then proceed to selective coding which facilitates reassembly of the data" (p. 93). This is aimed to ensure movement from general to specific.

Correspondingly, open, axial, and selective coding were used to analyze the collected data in this research. The open coding involved analysis of transcripts and written data in order to outline sentences and/or groups of sentences that presented similar ideas. Each of such groups received a code, which was further utilized to refer to the outlined idea. The axial coding allowed combining the identified items under abstract concepts. During the selective coding, the concepts were organized into categories.

## Reliability and Validity

In order to ensure the credibility of the research findings and, thus, reduce the possibility of getting the wrong answers to the researched questions, it is necessary to pay particular attention to two major emphases on research design – validity and reliability. Reliability here refers to the extent to which the "data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 156). Thus, reliability of the research is attained when similar observations can be reached by other observers and when there is transparency in the way sense is made from the raw data. In context of

qualitative research, other common terms like trustworthiness, authenticity, goodness, plausibility, and credibility are often used interchangeably with reliability (Carlson, 2010). Validity, on the other hand, concerns "whether the findings are really about what they appear to be about" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 157). In other words, validity refers to the dependability and causal relationship between the investigated variables. Valid research is that in which the researcher truly measures something he/she initially intended to measure. In case of qualitative data the term dependability is often used as an equivalent for validity. Both reliability and validity can be subjects to threats. For instance, as far as reliability is concerned, the following four threats can occur: subject or participant error, subject or participant bias, observer error, and observer bias. As for the validity, it can become under threat because of possible ambiguity about causal direction, instrumentation, or maturation of the research subjects.

Although the concepts of reliability and validity are usually used for testing or evaluating quantitative research, increasingly, they are treated as necessary for reaching the desired quality of the research disregarding the kind of research. As Patton (2001) stated, they were "two factors that any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results and judging the quality of the study" (as cited in Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). Various tactics can be employed by the researcher to ensure the reliability and validity of the research findings. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), three different lenses can be applied effectively by the researcher to determine and, respectively, ensure the credibility and validity of the research: the particular lens of the researcher, the lens of the participants in the study, and the lens of the individuals external to the study. On the one hand, the researcher strives to ensure credibility of a study through his/her own lens by determining major characteristics of the research. Patton (1980) described this as a process of returning to data "over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and

interpretations make sense" (as cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). Application of the participants' lens, when the participants become involved into data assessment process, on the other hand, allows checking whether the responses are understood correctly and in an unbiased manner. Finally, reviewers and readers, who are external to the study, can be invited to help establish validity of the research. All of the mentioned lenses are going to be employed in the given study in order to verify reliability and validity of the research findings. In particular, the following validity procedures will be utilized: triangulation as a means to retrieve information from different sources of data, thus increasing its reliability, member checking as lens of study participants, expert review, and thick, rich description.

In context of case study strategy, various techniques for data collection and data analysis can be applied. Furthermore, as Saunders and colleagues (2009) claimed, it was sound to combine several techniques, in order to use and triangulate multiple sources of data. Triangulation here referred to "the use of different data collection techniques within one study in order to ensure that the data are telling you what you think they are telling you" (p. 146). For instance, to reach the goal of the research through case study strategy and to ensure the reliability of the findings, the researcher can combine such data collection techniques as interviews, observation, documentary analysis, and/or questionnaires. Such triangulation allows illuminating the case from different angles.

**Triangulation**

Most researchers agree that triangulation is an excellent strategy for improving the validity and reliability of research and/or evaluation of findings. As a combination of methods for data collection or for data analysis, it allows engaging into the research that "probes for deeper understanding rather than examining surface features" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 603). In context of the chosen paradigm, the reality is socially constructed and continually changing. It depends on the interaction between people as social actors and their world, as

well as develops and becomes transmitted within a given social context. In order to ensure the validity and reliability in presentation and analysis of the diverse constructions of realities, both method and data triangulations should be applied.

Particularly, data is going to be collected through observation of the participants, survey administered via *Google Docs*, and interviews. To triangulate the data obtained through the survey, the participants' engagement into learning will also be analyzed through observation of attendance patterns and grade averages, particularly those higher than a C, during the current school year. Additionally, recordings are going to be made to ensure that the setting, the participants, and the major themes of the study are described in rich detail. Overall, such triangulation of data collection efforts will contribute to validity, as it will ensure that the research relies on "multiple forms of evidence rather than a single incident or data point in the study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). These procedures eventually increase the likelihood of applicability of the research findings to other settings or similar contexts.

**Member Checking**

Given that the reality is socially constructed, it is rather important to shift from the researcher to the participants in the study. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) described, member checking is "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility in a study" (as cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). According to Shenton (2004), member checking should involve "verification of the investigator's emerging theories and inferences as these were formed during the dialogues" (p. 68). The procedure of member checking will be carried out in the following manner. The collected data, as well as the made interpretations, are going to be taken back to the randomly chosen participants of the study. The focus group of the participants will be allowed to review the accuracy of the collected data and to update the interpretations in order to make them more precise. Incorporation of the participants'

comments will increase the credibility of the information. On the one hand, such approach to data interpretation and presentation will contribute to the elimination of the possible researcher bias. On the other hand, it will ensure that the obtained results reflect the reality, as a socially constructed phenomenon.

**Expert Review**

To assure the reliability and validity of the research findings from one more perspective, the third party – an external reviewer – is going to be invited to review the research-related documentation and interpretation of the collected data. Invitation of the person, the external expert, who is familiar either with the research or with the phenomenon under exploration, can be rather fruitful. On the one hand, it will provide support by establishing credibility. On the other hand, it is likely "challenge the researchers' assumptions, push the researchers to the next step methodologically, and ask hard questions about methods and interpretations" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). Additionally, the teacher can be invited as an external reader to review the collected data and the made interpretations and to leave some feedback.

**Thick and Rich Description**

Qualitative research effort usually involves the examination of unique individuals or groups of individuals in context of unique circumstances. However, in order to ensure the possibility of corroboration or substantiation of findings across similar situations within time, it is necessary to guarantee in-depth understanding of the commonalities that may exist among situations. Thick and rich description is a tool that allows such understanding of relevance of research findings to other settings. As Creswell and Miller (2000) identify, the purpose of this method of data collection is to draw the reader more closely into the story or narrative, which is expected to evoke a sense of connection with the participants in the study.

Thick and rich description is going to be utilized to ensure that the external experts have a comprehensive understanding of the case under analysis.

## Summary

The research on student engagement was carried out under the constructivist paradigm which assumes the social construction of reality. The choice of this paradigm was sound in context of both the research purpose and the outlined research questions. The major purpose of the study was to find out how and why student engagement varies in context of the examined classroom. Corresponding to this purpose, three research questions were developed that aimed at clarifying the following: what particular activities and experiences engaged the observed students into learning; in those students' perception, what constituted an engaging learning activity; and what could be done to enforce student engagement within the studied context. The whole research design and, particularly, the research methods were organized with regard to the mentioned statements.

Case study was chosen as a research strategy, and the students of seventh grade at Rippowam Middle School in Stamford, Connecticut were utilized as a study sample. In context of this strategy, they were surveyed, observed, and interviewed, which allowed learning and explaining the patterns of their engagement into learning, as well as factors influencing them. Such triangulation of methods of data collection was applied because of its soundness in context of the chosen research philosophy and approach. By conducting the study in several stages through triangulated methods of data collection, the researcher was able to develop hypotheses based on initially collected data and to test them in the process of study that continued. In particular, the conclusions (i.e., the hypotheses) based on the data collected through the survey were tested by the data received through observations and focus group interviews. For data analysis, constant comparative method was applied. The collected items were coded and decoded, and repeatedly reviewed, compare, and analyzed, until clear

patters were outlined, that allowed integrating categories and their properties. Based on the found categorized, a theory on student engagement and factors that affect it was delimited.

In order to ensure the trustworthiness and dependability of the research findings, the aspects of reliability and validity were addressed in the research. The researched triangulated several methods, including thick and rich description, member checking, and expert review, aimed at ensuring both validity and reliability of the made conclusions. In context of the thick and rich description effort, detailed recordings of several episodes that took place during the study were kept to create the verisimilitude and present the whole study in a comprehensive manner. In terms of member checking, the accuracy of the collected data was periodically reviewed by the focus group comprised of the randomly chosen participants. Finally, the external reader was invited to review the accuracy of data and ensure their trustworthiness.

# Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

## Introduction

The major purpose of this research was to illuminate particular factors influencing student engagement. In order to fulfill this goal, it became necessary to distinguish between observable and self-reported student engagement in context of the research. Thus, students' behavior was observed by the researcher with the aim to document such noticeable indicators of student engagement as on-task attention, effort investment, and persistence resulting in good or excellent academic performance in correlation with particular aspects of learning context. Additionally, a survey and focus group interview were conducted to estimate the self-reported student engagement in context of the examined learning environment, which corresponded to student perspective on the topic.

While conducting the research, the researcher sought to respond to the following research questions:

1. What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning during the semester?
2. What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?
3. How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context?

With regard to the multiple themes that precipitated from the collected data, five major groups of factors were outlined as affecting student engagement and, correspondingly, student academic achievement in context of the examined case:

1) communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences;
2) interactions between students and teachers;
3) levels of academic challenge;

4) supporting classroom environment; and

5) supporting family environment.

The results, which correspond to the outlined clusters of factors, are reported with regard to the major categories and themes and discussed from the perspective of the research questions.

## RQ1: What Did Students Enjoy About School That Engaged Them Into Learning During The Semester?

Both the survey and the focus group interview intended to explore the attitudes of the participants toward their school. The students were encouraged to reveal their opinions regarding the particular characteristics and features of the school that made the attendance more interesting and learning more engaging during the semester. The analysis of the obtained data allowed outlining several major themes to answer the research question 1.

In particular, the participants were asked directly regarding the aspects that they liked most about school. The majority of students responded that they valued school as a place where they "socialized with peers," "met new people," and "gained new skills and knowledge." Additionally, many had responded that school was a place where they could get support from peers and teachers. Feeling emotionally supported and respected by teachers and classmates was found to contribute greatly to the participant's overall satisfaction with school. When asked to outline the features of school that attracted them the most, the participants tended to use the following words and phrases: "collaboration," "support," "safe place," "sense of belonging," "community life participation," "communication," "fair attitude," "fair treatment," "freely expressing thoughts," and "interesting events" among others. The students also accentuated that they particularly enjoyed school when their achievements were noticed and recognized by others, both teachers and classmates.

These findings were consistent with the previous research. In particular, they were supportive of the conclusions of Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, and Salovey (2012), who

found that students felt more comfortable and engaged in classrooms where they were respected and supported, as well as encouraged to cooperate with one another. As evident from the findings, the participants devoted considerable attention to communication with peers and peer emotional support as features of engaging school experience. This widely corresponded to the findings of Wang and Eccles (2013), who hypothesized and found a positive association between the peer emotional support and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. It was evident from the case study and from a wide body of previous research (e.g., Frazier & Eighmy, 2012; Jensen, 2013; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Remmen & Froyland, 2014; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), strong social networks were necessary for the school experience to be engaging. Most of these studies also suggested the need for a learning community to be developed and the importance of sense of belonging to such a community in students. The results of the case study supported such a need, showing that students enjoyed the sense of belonging to a community and the participation in community life events.

The participants were also eager to reveal some negative aspects of their school environment. The majority of the students outlined peer conflicts and strict teachers who screamed during the class as the most distressing factors that made school experience less satisfying. The respondents acknowledged that they provoked anxiety and contributed to a sense of helplessness among the students. Peer conflicts were characterized by the focus group as “distracting” and “threatening.” As for the teacher’s instructional styles, the students responded that it was challenging for them to comprehend the task when the teacher screamed in class or shouted at someone. They were afraid to make a mistake and felt helpless, preferring to be silent rather than participating in an activity.

These findings were relevant in context of the existing research. Considerable portion of studies that were earlier reviewed in context of this research stressed the importance of the

quality of teachers' instructional style and the great influence teacher-student interaction had on students' engagement into learning activities and academic achievement in general (e.g., Burgess, 2015; Guvenc, 2015; Jang et al., 2010; Jensen, 2013; Reyes et al., 2012; Swiderski, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Neihart, 2015). The findings provided a strong support for the need to maintain a high quality of teachers' instructions. According to the outcomes of the current research, supportive teachers were found to positively contribute to student engagement. By attaining and maintaining positive classroom emotional climate, they also maintained respectful relationships between teacher and students and between students in the class, which confidently supported the suggestions of some academic studies (e.g., Reyes et al., 2012; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). In contrast, teachers who maintained classrooms with neutral or negative emotional climates were found to have little or no emotional connection with their students. This resulted in discomfort, boredom, and confusion among students and often coupled with poor performance. As Reyes et al. (2012) claimed, in these classrooms, students felt threatened and were uncertain about "how to approach the teacher" (p. 701). In addition, as Wang and Eccles (2013) found, teachers who were clear about their expectations supported greater behavioral participation in academic tasks, while inability to clearly express one's expectations was likely to lead to behavioral and emotional disengagement.

Some relationship between school attendance enjoyment and general attitude to learning was found as well. The students, who were found to be less actively involved into learning (i.e., they had lower grades and were less likely to voluntary participate in learning activities), referred to their studying as "boring" and "useless," reporting that they could find little connection between theoretical knowledge they gained at school and practical issues in real life. The highly involved students (i.e., those who were often and rather active participants or various in-class activities and eager respondents to teacher's questions), in contrast, considered their learning to be of great value. They strongly believed that it was

important for their future education and careers. Interestingly, the respondents who underestimated the value of their learning, tended to avoid after-class discussions of learning activities. Instead, as became evident from the observations, most of them – particularly boys, preferred to discuss video games with their classmates. Similarly, they were unlikely to share their education-related concerns with their parents, who frequently were too busy to provide an adequate supervision to their children. Those who valued their education, in contrast, were much concerned with the tasks they received, discussing them after classes with classmates and with parents.

The observed associations between the general attitude to learning (i.e., perception of the value of learning) and the school experience enjoyment, as well as engagement into learning, were fully consistent with prior research. Providing confident support to some prior academic studies (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Bock & Erickson, 2015; Guvenc, 2015; Jensen, 2013; Phillips, 2015; Rodriguez-Keyes, Schneider, & Keenan, 2013; Shernoff et al., 2003), current results strongly suggested the importance of the comprehensive to students link between the in-class activities and the real-life situations. It was indicated by the findings that the presence of such a link, evident to students (at least based on their perceptions), significantly contributed to their interest in participation in learning activities. Solving real-life problems that extend beyond the classroom contributed to the perceived relevance of instruction and, correspondingly, to student engagement.

## RQ2: What Are Student Perceptions Of Engaging Learning Activity, Classroom, And School?

Upon analysis of data obtained during the case study, several themes were outlined to answer the second research question. It turned to be relevant to categorize the estimated themes into two major categories of factors influencing student engagement: context-related factors, which included or referred to the components of the learning environment and

individual factors, which were related with one's background, for instance, with one's socioeconomic status or family composition.

Several clear themes were outlined as a result of the data analysis process. The first theme noted in the data was the connection between parent engagement and student engagement. The responses to both the survey and the interview clearly reflected that parents' expectations and availability of a role model at home positively contributed to student engagement. The data indicated that students, whose parents were reported to hold greater expectations regarding their children's academic achievements, were more active during in-class activities and expressed greater interest regarding participation in extra-curricular activities. The students from such families had showed better attendance, were more active during the class activities, and made more efforts to complete their homework. These children reported to be satisfied with the amount of homework they received.

In contrast, children, whose parents reported to being less engaged, spent less time doing their homework and, on average, had worse attendance records. It was strongly suggested by the findings that lack of adequate parent supervision had a negative effect on children; academic performance and overall engagement into learning. Compared to their peers from engaged families, children from less involved or uninvolved families were unsatisfied with the amount of their homework. Frequently, they failed to complete home tasks because of lack of focus on homework. In some cases, lack of role models at home was pared with the need to take care of younger siblings or with other time-consuming home responsibilities. Children, whose parents were less involved, reported less interest in pursuing greater academic achievements. They turned out to be less equipped to recognize the practical value of education, of which claims of uselessness of studying suggested.

In addition, parent involvement was found to affect self-advocacy in children, particularly, in context of their interactions with teachers. Children, whose parents were

reported to be more involved, were found to be more active in class and more likely to actively advocate their points of view on discussed topics. Children, whose parents were less engaged, tended to avoid self-advocacy. They reported that their parents tended to perceive teachers as "always right," which undermined the motivations for self-advocacy. The observations and responses enabled to distinguish family environment as an important cluster that united factors influencing student engagement in the case under analysis. Supportive family environments considerably encouraged students to engage in learning. Lack of support from family, on the other hand, was found to result in lack of engagement.

The findings corresponded to conclusions presented in some prior studies (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012), primarily, because they supported the importance of family engagement as an amplifier of student engagement. The observed differences in in-class behaviors and attitudes to learning in students, whose parents were involved, and students, whose parents paid little attention to supervision of their children, supported the idea of conceptualization of parent involvement as a tool for raising student achievement (Auerbach, 2009; Mutch & Collins, 2012). They were also consistent in context of earlier discussed studies, which claimed that effective interaction between school and family could stimulate student engagement in a rather short period of time (e.g., Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Wang & Neihart, 2015). As evident, the findings strongly suggested the connection between parents' recognition of the importance of education, testified by family involvement into child's learning, and the student's ability to comprehend the value of education and its practical importance. The character of this connection may require closer examination by the future research.

The second theme outlined from the data suggested the connection between teacher's instructional style and student engagement, as well as perception of the classroom and learning activities as engaging. Most responses showed that supportive classroom was

positively perceived by most of the respondents. In particular, the members of the focus group referred to “clearly explained tasks,” “real-life examples,” “autonomy during some activities,” “connections between school activities and personal interests,” “working in teams,” “having choice,” and “freely communicating points of view during the discussions” among others as the major features of engaging classroom. The respondents acknowledged that they used to become particularly engaged into learning activities when they clearly comprehended the teacher’s expectations and when they had an opportunity to take part in decision-making, thus taking certain responsibility and gaining sense of personal satisfaction. The respondents outlined teacher’s praise as one of the factors that contributed to the desire to take an active part in in-class learning activities.

In contrast, teachers yelling in the classroom were reported to produce negative influence on student satisfaction with the courses and on student engagement into class activities. Lack of comprehension of tasks was also outlined as a disengaging feature of learning activity. Both of them prevented students to take an active part in class activities and discussions, thus contributing to the sense of helplessness and boredom. Correspondingly, supportive classroom environment and interactions between students and teachers became distinguished as other two clusters of factors, producing considerable impact on student engagement. These findings were consistent with the prior research (e.g., Bock & Erickson, 2015; Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Jang et al., 2010; Reyes et al., 2012). Similarly, they suggested the importance of teachers’ instructional styles. They indicated the need to support student autonomy and provide clear structure of the learning activity. These interventions were found to encourage student engagement. The findings also corresponded to a wide body of research on teacher-student interaction and on the need for emotionally supportive classroom (e.g., Burgess, 2015; Guvenc, 2015; Jang et al., 2010; Jensen, 2013; Reyes et al., 2012; Swiderski, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Neihart, 2015).

Likewise the earlier discussed studies, this case study indicated that the quality of emotional connection between the teacher and the student, as well as between the students in the classroom, was crucial for the development of supportive in context of student engagement learning environment.

The third major theme that was found during the thesis study referred to the technology use. Teacher's use of technology was found to positively contribute to the student's interest in learning. Similarly, the respondents reported that they were more captivated by the in-class activities that allowed them/required them to use computers. The lessons in which children could use computers were outlined to be more interesting and more engaging. On the other hand, video game usage among boys was found to challenge student engagement. As the data indicated, boys who spent great amount of time playing video games attributed less attention to homework, had problems with getting enough sleep, and were less active during the classes. Thus, communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences were outlined as another important cluster of factors influencing student engagement in the case under analysis. Consistent with the prior research, these findings supported the great potential of application of technological advances in studying and learning suggested by previous studies in the field (e.g., Burgess, 2015; Canada, Sanguino, Cuervos, & Santos, 2014; Conradi, 2014; Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Eddy & Patton, 2010; Stroud, Drayton, Hobbs, & Falk, 2014). Implementation of technology into the teacher's instructional style, on the one hand, was found to effectively enhance teacher-student communication and, on the other hand, allowed greater student autonomy and student responsibility over the outcomes of learning activities (Conradi, 2014; Dietrich & Balli, 2014; Eddy & Patton, 2010; Parkin et al., 2012).

Finally, the data provided strong support for the connection between persistence in pursuing academic achievement and participation in extracurricular activities, which widely

corresponded to the findings of previous studies (e.g., Auerbach, 2009; Phillips, 2015). Children who were active during the classes reported to be active after the classes as well. These children actively participated in sports and took foreign language courses. Simultaneously, these respondents reported to have enough time for their homework. The perception of the levels of academic challenge was found to differ greatly among the engaged and the disengaged students. The perception of the value of education and the opportunities for its application in the future were found to differ as well, which corresponded to previous research (Ezeala-Harrison, 1996; Jensen, 2013; Lee & Bierman, 2015).

**RQ3: How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context?**

Overall, the results of the survey indicated that most of the students sampled were engaged in their learning, because they were active during the classes and revealed enthusiasm regarding their home tasks. However, both the survey and the focus group interview strongly suggested that, depending on the particular aspect of student engagement – behavioral, cognitive, or emotional, the participants revealed varying degrees of engagement. Highly engaged students enjoyed their school attendance, actively participating in both most learning activities and extracurricular events. Disengaged students, on the other hand, reported to be less involved into learning, paid less attention to their home tasks, were less likely to attend extracurricular events, and saw little connection between in-class activities and personal interests, as well as real-life situations. As the data showed, disengaged students often lacked supportive family environment and, thus, had no role-model at home to follow. As for the teacher-student interaction, they were found to show little self-advocacy. The sense of helplessness in these students increased when they did not comprehend the task or were taught by a teacher who screamed in class.

Correspondingly, in order to further enforce student engagement within the studied context, it was found to be necessary to resolve the outlined problems. The research

suggested that this could be achieved through increased attention to the presented clusters of factors: communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences; interactions between students and teachers; levels of academic challenge; supporting classroom environment; and supporting family environment (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). It was found that the listed clusters of factors were closely correlated. Thus, in order to enhance communication, collaboration and active involvement into learning activities, it was found to be necessary to attain and maintain a supportive classroom environment, in context of which the interaction between the teacher and the students would be encouraging and emotionally supportive rather than neutral or negatively demanding. This finding widely corresponded to several previously discussed academic studies (e.g., Burgess, 2015; Guvenc, 2015; Jang et al., 2010; Jensen, 2013; Reyes et al., 2012; Swiderski, 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Wang & Neihart, 2015). As suggested in the mentioned studies, teacher-student interaction often leaved permanent impressions on students. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to show sincere interest in both students' learning and their personalities, as well as to praise students' academic achievements. This study also found positive connection between the student's capability to handle challenging academic tasks and availability of supportive family environment. This finding also turned out to strongly support some earlier made suggestions (Auerbach, 2009; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Additionally, they supported the need to keep parents involved: parents who were aware of children's progress were found to have more chances to promote the longing for academic achievement in their children.

# Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

## Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore major factors that influence student engagement in a middle school context. Prior to the research, a literature review was carried out. On the one hand, it revealed the popularity of research on student engagement among members of contemporary academic community. To wide extend, it responded to the need for practical guidance on how to make the learning experience of students more engaging. On the other hand, literature review indicated a clear need for further research that would contribute to the systematization of the extensive but quite chaotic body of knowledge on the topic. With this regard, a case study was carried out, in terms of which 60 students of two seventh grade classes were observed, surveyed, and encouraged to participate in a focus-group interview. During the case study, the researcher sought for both external factors influencing student engagement and the ways to classify them.

This case study was developed to respond to the following specific research questions:

1. What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning during the semester?
2. What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?
3. How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context?

During the intervention period, the researcher collected a rich body of valuable information that addressed each of the outlined research questions.

The qualitative data from the researcher's observations, students' responses to the survey questions, and responses to focus-group interview questions were presented in the results section. The findings were classified so that to respond to the research questions. Each

question was answered through the analysis of the collected data. The results indicated that the factors that influenced student engagement in context of the conducted case study can be categorized in the following manner:

1) communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences;
2) interactions between students and teachers;
3) levels of academic challenge;
4) supporting classroom environment; and
5) supporting family environment.

Each of the five clusters of factors to greater or lesser extent was found to produce influence on students' desire to participate in learning activities and students' perception of the importance of learning. Widely, most factors found during the case study as rather influential corresponded to those suggested by prior research and acknowledged during the literature review. The case study strongly suggested that in order to stimulate student engagement, it is necessary to develop interventions that address each of the outlined clusters of factors.

## Limitations of the Study

There are three main limitations that affected this research study. The first limitation to be mentioned is the study sample. Although a total of 60 students were surveyed, about 40% of the sample belonged to families that suffered from poverty. As the demographic characteristics suggested, the sample was not as diverse as desired. Therefore, the sample cannot be considered as representative and the results cannot be seen as widely applicable. Instead, both the sample and the obtained results were rather case and context specific, which limits their applicability.

The second limitation refers to the relative approximateness in deciding which students were engaged and which students were disengaged. On the one hand, the researcher

took into consideration the average grade of each of the students involved into the study. It was assumed that students who had higher grades were more engaged than students with lower grades, which was consistent with academic research and the reviewed literature that suggested a strong link between the academic achievement and student engagement. On the other hand, the researcher observed the students. During the observations, particular attention was paid to the eagerness that students expressed during the learning activities or lack of such as denoting the level of student engagement. Similarly, it was taken into consideration the suggestion in academic literature that student engagement was evident from behavior during the in-class activities. Still, the levels of student engagement were not measured empirically during the case study, which limits the applicability of the results.

Finally, the third limitation that affected this study was the aspect of time. Although the period of time assigned for the case study allowed outlining a set of factors that were further classified into separate clusters, the observation period was too short to truly make an argument that by addressing a single or each cluster one can improve student engagement. In order to find out the extent to which each of the outlined clusters of factors affects student engagement, the longitudinal study is needed. If undertaken, in context of such study, each of the clusters of factors could be addressed by the intervention, so that the outcomes could be estimated. The longitudinal study was not possible given the time frame of this research.

## Implications for Practice

Although the findings generated in context of this case study are limited in applicability, they present considerable value for practice. The first implication for practice that should be mentioned is the relevance of the findings in the school where the case study was carried out. The results clearly suggested both the advantages and the disadvantages of the learning process as perceived by the students of the school under attention. The findings were valuable as they could be used to improve the situation in the school and contribute to

student engagement. In particular, the teachers have the ability to effectively address the needs of students by eliminating practices that were cited to distract and frighten the student. Teachers have the potential to promote emotionally supportive classroom by stopping shouting and preventing conflicts between students. Furthermore, teachers also have the ability to consider the effect that parents' involvement was documented to produce on students eagerness to participate in learning activities. Finally, teachers have the potential to stimulate parents to pay more attention to their children's studying, for instance, by sending regular reports regarding attendance and academic progress.

Another important implication for practice that should be mentioned is related with the approach to classification of factors influencing student engagement into clusters. As evident, five major groups or clusters of factors were outlined as a result of this case study. Each of the clusters referred to a separate sphere and particular perspective on educational process. Thus, it became evident that in order to improve student engagement, it was necessary to develop a set of interventions that address various aspects of the learning process. In light of the conducted case study, the school under attention can develop and implement a five-layer program for student engagement promotion, where each of the layers aims at addressing one of the outlined clusters of factors. For instance, one layer of the program can be aimed at promoting the idea of creating an emotionally supportive classroom among teachers, while another layer can contain guidance regarding the extracurricular activities and measures aimed at raising student and family interest.

## Suggestions for Future Research

Despite the rich body of prior research on student engagement, additional studies are needed that would analyze the patterns of change in the levels of student engagement from the longitudinal perspective. These studies should not only seek to measure student engagement, but provide interventions that address particular factors influencing engagement

and estimate the effects the interventions would produce in the level of engagement within time. Many of the existing studies were aimed on the estimation of the causal links between student engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes. As these links were proved to be rather clear, now, it becomes more relevant to empirically seek for ways to control the levels of student engagement to reach the desired academic outcomes.

Furthermore, as contemporary society exists in the age of sophisticated technological solutions, it is relevant to suggest the need for research that examines the application of modern social media as tools for reaching desired levels of student engagement. While current research tried to assess the impact of technology application on student engagement during the in-class activities, the role of social media and their possible usage by the teacher with education-related purposes were widely ignored. Still, given the role such social media as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* among others play in contemporary society, it may rather relevant to examine how they can be applied by the teachers to promote learning among students and to contribute to student engagement.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Sample Survey

Table A1: Fixed-Choice Questions Aimed at Estimation of Levels of Student Engagement

| Questions<br>During this year, how often have you done the following? | Very often | Often | Sometimes | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Asked questions and/or took part in a discussion | | | | |
| 2. Worked with other students on the course projects and/or tasks | | | | |
| 3. Attended sports, museum, exhibit, play, dancing, or any other extracurricular activities | | | | |
| 4. Prepared two or more drafts for the assignment before turning it in | | | | |
| 5. Explained course material to another student | | | | |
| 6. Discussed plans for continuing education with peers, teachers, parents | | | | |
| 7. Combined ideas from different courses while working on some assignment | | | | |
| 8. Came to class unprepared, for instance, without completing the assignment and/or reading | | | | |
| 9. Tried to stay home from school | | | | |
| 10. Just pretended to be working in class | | | | |

For each question, four options of response are provided: very often, often, sometimes, and never.

Open-Ended Questions Aimed at Outlining Factors Affecting Student Engagement

1. List five things or more that you like most about school (for instance, particular kinds of activities, communication, etc.)

_____

_____

2. List five things or more that you do not like most about school (for instance, schedule, particular kinds of activities, etc.)

_____

_____

3. Do you like learning? Motivate your answer by explaining why.

_____

_____

4. Do you discuss your learning activities, tasks, and/or homework after classes? With whom?

_____

_____

5. Do you discuss your academic achievements and/or daily learning activities with your parents? Who initiates the talk?

_____

_____

6. Do you like to attend extracurricular activities? Motivate your answer with an explanation why.

_____

_____

7. Are there teachers whose classes you like the most? Motivate your answer by explaining why.

_____

_____

8. Are there teachers whose classes you would like not to attend? Motivate your answer with an explanation why.

_____

_____

9. How much time do you spend on homework on average? When do you do your homework (for instance, immediately after the classes etc.)?

_____

_____

10. List five things or more that motivate you most to go to school and attend classes.

_____

_____

## Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

Table B1: Focus Group Protocol

| | |
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| Introduction<br><br>(5 minutes) | Introduction: Presentation of the Researcher and the Study<br><br>Thank you for agreeing to meet with me here today. My name is ___. I am a teacher and I conduct this research in order to gain a deeper insight into a very interesting and relevant topic – student engagement. If you answer the questions honestly, this research in the realm of student engagement is likely to make your studying at this school more interesting and capturing.<br><br>I have already conducted a survey, in which you and your classmates kindly took part. Based on the survey, I have outline certain conclusions regarding your and your classmates' engagement into learning, as well as your attitude to education and the process of studying, this school, your classes, and your classmates. Now, in order to make sure that the conclusions are correct, I would rather appreciate if you could discuss with me several important topics.<br><br>If you don't mind, I will record our conversation in order to be able, afterwards, to consider all of the points of view that were discussed today. Of course, your responses will be treated as confidential. Neither your names, nor any other personal information will be included into the reports that I will write in the future. All the notes and audiotapes that contain personal information are going to be destroyed immediately after the study is completed and the results are published.<br><br>Do you have any questions about the study?<br><br>Ok, then. Let's proceed with the discussion and remember that there is no right or wrong answer. Each of you has a unique experience and, when answering questions, you should rely on that experience , revealing you point of view. |
| Topic 1<br><br>(10 minutes) | Topic 1: Acquaintance with the Participants<br><br>1. To begin with, tell me little bit about your-self.<br>a. PROBE: What kind of person are you? |

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| | b. PROBE: Are you communicative?<br>c. PROBE: Do you like to socialize with friends?<br>2. Do you like studying?<br>a. PROBE: What do you like most about attending school?<br>b. PROBE: How important is education for you?<br>c. PROBE: Are you engaged into learning?<br>d. PROBE: How would you define engagement into learning? |
| Topic 2<br><br>(20 minutes) | Topic 2: Engaging School<br>(What the students enjoyed about school that engaged them into learning during the semester?)<br>1. Tell me what do you think about our school?<br>a. PROBE: What words would you use to describe the school?<br>b. PROBE: What associations it invokes?<br>c. PROBE: Do you feel safe here?<br>d. PROBE: Do you like coming here?<br>e. PROBE: Does the school satisfy your needs in studying or it requires some improvement and/or change?<br>2. What characteristics of our school particularly attract you as a student?<br>3. What do you think about the curriculum?<br>a. PROBE: Are you satisfied with your studying program?<br>b. PROBE: Do you consider you classes challenging, too challenging, or not challenging enough?<br>c. PROBE: Are you satisfied with your schedule, program flexibility, responsiveness in context of your needs?<br>d. PROBE: What do you value most about our curriculum?<br>4. What do you think about extracurricular activities promoted by the school?<br>a. PROBE: Do you attend them?<br>b. PROBE: Do you enjoy them?<br>c. PROBE: How do they affect your studying? Do they make your studying experience better?<br>5. What do you parents think about our school? |

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| | a. PROBE: Are they satisfied that you study here?<br>b. PROBE: Do they communicate with the representatives of the school? How often?<br>c. PROBE: Do they attend the extracurricular activities organized by the school? How often? What impressions they have, if they share? |
| Topic 3<br><br>(20 minutes) | Topic 3: Engaging Class<br>(What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?)<br>1. What kinds of in-class learning activities do you like most?<br>a. PROBE: Do you like to work in groups or prefer individual tasks?<br>b. PROBE: Do the tasks you receive from the teacher correspond to your capabilities?<br>c. PROBE: How do you perceive a challenging task: as an obstacle or as a chance to reveal your hidden talents?<br>2. How do you think, what is the major role of the teacher in the classroom?<br>a. PROBE: What does teacher support mean to you?<br>b. PROBE: (Teacher's instructional style) When do you have more chances to learn new information and gain new skills: when you do tasks that are explained by the teacher step by step or when the teacher leaves you certain freedom in decision-making?<br>c. PROBE: How you and your peers react to teacher's attempt to fully control the class (for instance, screaming)?<br>d. PROBE: How you and your peers react to teachers who instruct and support class in decision making instead of providing ready-made solutions?<br>3. What influence do your peers make on your perception of school?<br>a. PROBE: Does socialization and communication with peers/friends at school contributes to your sense of |

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| | engagement?<br>b. PROBE: How do you perceive your peers: as companions in learning or as competitors?<br>c. PROBE: Do you feel supported by your classmates?<br>4. How do your parents express interest in your academic achievements?<br>a. PROBE: Do they communicate with your teacher on a regular basis?<br>b. PROBE: Do they help you with your home tasks?<br>c. PROBE: Do they take part in school's social life?<br>d. PROBE: How do you react to your parent's concerns regarding your learning? |
| Topic 4<br><br>(15 minutes) | Topic 4: Making our school more engaging<br>(How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context?)<br>1. What can our school do to make you more engaged in learning?<br>2. What can you as a part of our school's population do to make your studying more engaging? |
| Final Thoughts<br><br>(5 minutes) | Those were all the questions that I wanted to ask.<br>Do you have any final thoughts about aspects that can make our school more engaging?<br>Thank you very much for your time! |